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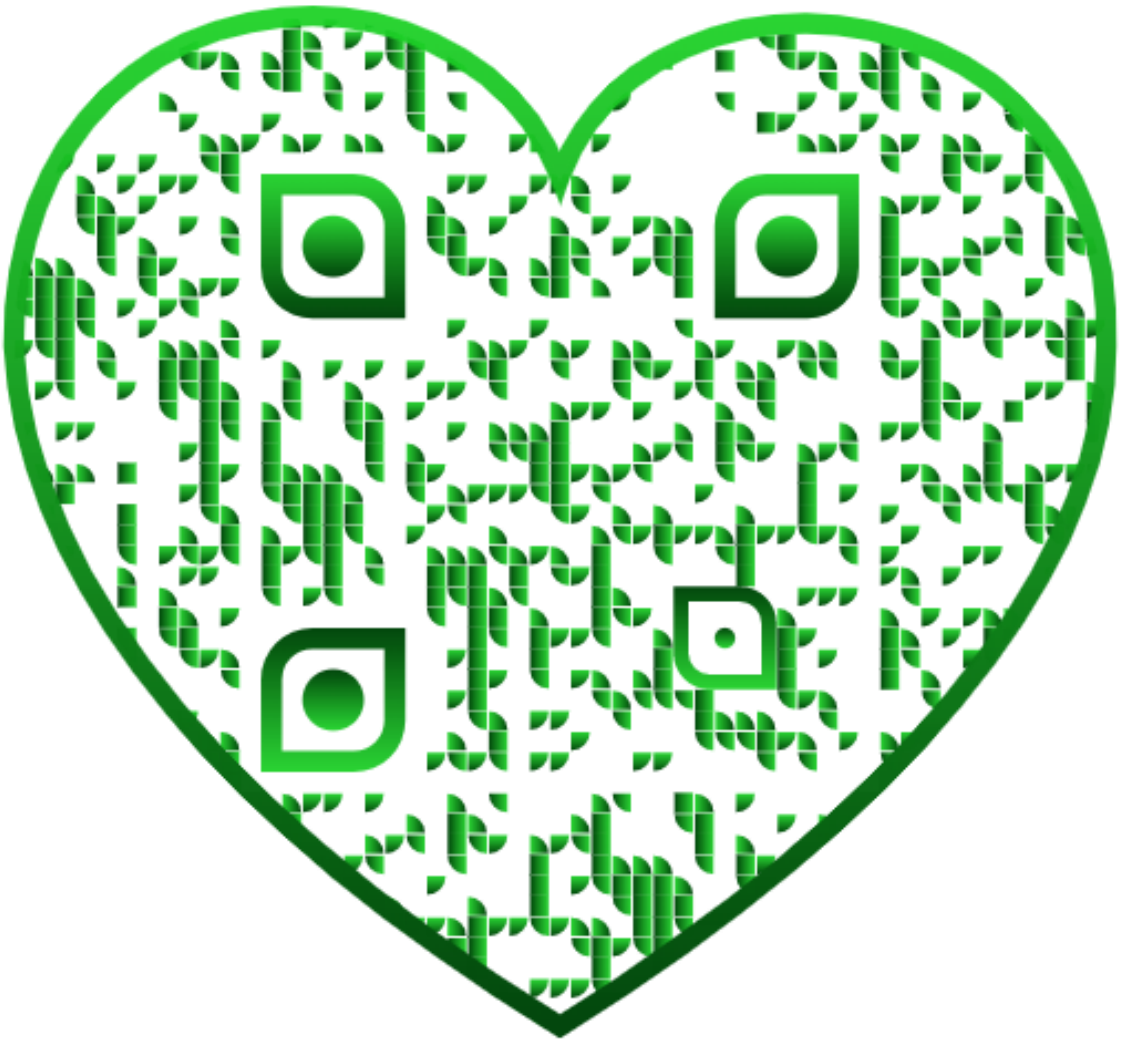

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MAGICO

AS WE SEE IT

BY JIM AUSTIN

THIS ISSUE: A master returns.

Shaken, not stirred

A few months ago, the hi-fi world learned that Audio Research, perhaps the most storied hi-fi brand in US history (McIntosh would be the other choice), had a new owner. The company had overextended itself, then filed for "Assignment for the Benefit of Creditors"—somewhat like Chapter 11 bankruptcy but different. The company was then acquired by a group led by a Canadian, Valerio Cora of Acora Acoustics. In the September issue's Industry Update, I wrote, "Audio Research, that great American hi-fi company, is now Canadian."

Not long after the issue came out, I received a note from Dave Gordon of Audio Research Corporation. With typical good humor, Dave suggested that my characterization was not correct—that ARC is not in fact Canadian. Why? Because Audio Research's parent company is based in ... Delaware?

AR Tube Audio, Audio Research's new parent company, is incorporated in the state of Delaware. So are more than two-thirds of all Fortune 500 companies; apparently being incorporated in Delaware offers significant legal and tax benefits. More important, I'd say, is that Audio Research's operations will remain in Minnesota, their ancestral home. On that basis, I'll admit that referring to Audio Research as Canadian was flippant and not well-considered.

What Audio Research is, then, is a Minnesota-based company owned by a holding company incorporated in Delaware that's controlled by a Canadian. The best way to sum that all up, maybe, is: Who really cares? Not me.

In this issue, on p.77, Martin Colloms reviews the Naim NAP 250 amplifier. Yes, you read that right: This issue includes a contribution from Martin Colloms, reviewing Naim. That combination is a bit like fish and chips, or like Tanqueray and Noilly Prat, if Noilly Prat were British and not French (although France-based Noilly Pratt is owned by Martini & Rossi, an Italian company, which is owned by Bacardi, which is based in Bermuda; see the ARC discussion above). It's Martin Colloms's first *Stereophile* review in almost 25 years.

"I first met Martin Colloms in 1977," John Atkinson told me recently, "not long after I had joined English magazine *Hi-Fi News & Record Review* and soon after Martin had left Monitor Audio, where he had been designing loudspeakers. He started writing reviews for *Hi-Fi Choice*, which accompanied its technical tests with the results of blind listening tests. I took part in many of Martin's blind tests. It was an education in how to listen."

Colloms was, in fact, a cofounder of Monitor Audio, something he did at quite a young age. His background is classic hi-fi: He got fascinated early with the science of sound, building radios and making an ad hoc record player that could play "a jumble-sale 78rpm shellac disc with a pencil shoved through it and a curled paper horn fit with a darning needle. ... I heard the Grand March from *Aida* for the very first time, in sound bits of about 2 seconds."[1] He attended engineering school with a side gig selling and testing products at "pioneering audio retailer Audio T." He spent a few years doing R&D outside the hi-fi industry, at a division of Tektronix. His return to hi-fi came in 1972, when he cofounded Monitor Audio. Before he knew it, he was a professional loudspeaker designer.

Colloms wrote extensively for *Hi-Fi Choice* and *Hi-Fi News*, both *Stereophile* partner publications, and other hi-fi magazines. In 2007, he founded *HiFiCritic*, which recently stopped publishing new material.

John Atkinson, in his *Stereophile* review of the seventh edition of Martin's book,[2] characterizes Martin as something of a mentor. "The experience of learning from a master—not only of the craft of designing loudspeakers, but also of the art of judging them—provided this then-tyro audio critic with an invaluable education in how to listen, and what to listen for."

"I asked Martin to contribute reviews to *Hi-Fi News*," JA told me, "and when he reviewed a loudspeaker, I would travel with him to Acoustic Research's anechoic chamber about 25 miles north of London to help him with the measurements. This was an education in how and what to measure.

"After I joined *Stereophile* in 1986, it was a no-brainer to ask Martin to write for the magazine. One of his first *Stereophile* articles, on why full-range performance is not necessarily a primary goal for a loudspeaker designer,[3] was published in August 1987. One of his most influential articles, "Pace, Rhythm, & Dynamics," was published in 1992.[4]"

Another indication of his stature: During a recent conversation, the head of one of the world's leading high-end speaker companies spoke of that book and its author with reverence.

In reading through Martin's past *Stereophile* contributions, I came across an essay he contributed to this space—As We See It—in 1991. In those days, As We See It essays could run long, far beyond p.3. Martin's essay takes up eight pages online.[5] In it, Martin expresses many opinions that I, in my few years as *Stereophile*'s editor, have come to embrace: That reviewers are "vested with a heavy responsibility: to try to produce fair, consistent, accurate opinions for their readers' guidance." That attaining that high standard is very difficult and must be diligently pursued. That the difficulty rises further when the reviewer realizes that, as Martin stated in that article, you are also obliged to be fair to the manufacturer—after all, even consumers stand to lose when a good and serious manufacturer is unfairly condemned by an irresponsible reviewer.

Our most important point of agreement: Reviews of hi-fi equipment are fundamentally, unequivocally subjective. There can be no other way. I'm a great lover of certainty. I would be thrilled if I could leave my opinion out and consider a review to be a mere technical exercise. It won't work. "Fundamentally a review is based on opinion," Colloms wrote, "of which a large proportion is composed of wholly subjective reactions to sound quality."

Martin, welcome (back) to the team. ■

1 The quotes are from an interview with Wojciech Pacuła published in March 2012 in *High Fidelity* magazine. See highfidelity.pl/@main-271&lang=en.

2 See stereophile.com/content/book-review-high-performance-loudspeakers-seventh-edition.

3 See stereophile.com/content/who-stole-bass-no-one-stole-bass-page-4.

4 See stereophile.com/reference/23/index.html.

5 It was originally written, apparently, as a presentation intended for a conference that never happened. See stereophile.com/asweseeit/190/index.html.

EISA AWARD

Best Product 2023-2024

HIGH-END LOUDSPEAKERS

Wilson Audio Alexia V

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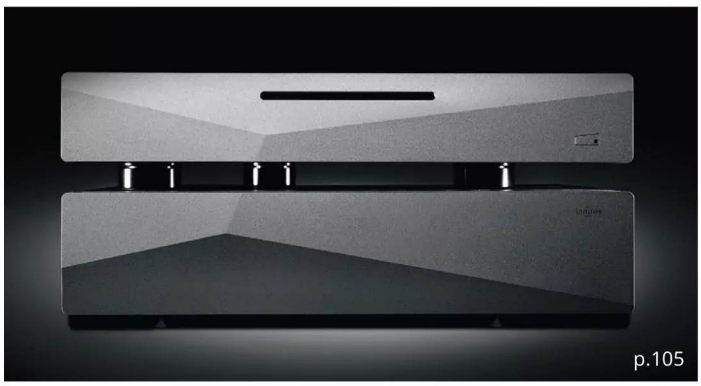
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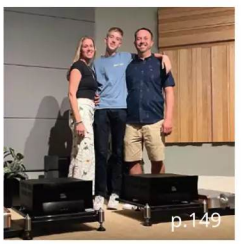
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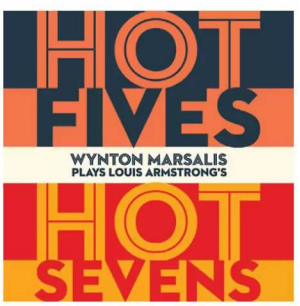

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– Chris Connaker, Audiophile Style

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– Ingo Schulz, FIDELITY Magazine

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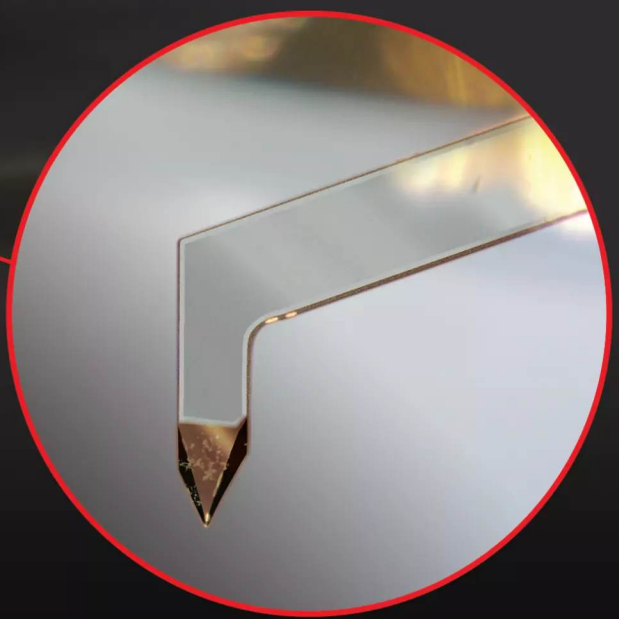

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LETTERS FEEDBACK TO THE EDITOR

TAKE HEED! Unless marked otherwise, all letters to the magazine and its writers are assumed to be for possible publication. Please include your name and physical address. We reserve the right to edit for length and content.

Returning to the fold

Thank you, *Stereophile*, especially Herb.

Some 30 years ago or so, I sent a letter to your magazine telling how I got the hi-fi bug and with the help of a local dealer and *Stereophile* magazine, I was able to compile a system of B- and C-grade Recommended Components (NAD, Snell, Cary) that sounded great and served me well. Then life and other interests came along. I sold the system and abandoned hi-fi. But deep down, I knew I'd be back.

About 3 years ago, after retirement, I almost blithely picked up both *Stereophile* and that other high-end publication, and it all came back. I knew I didn't want to be without great music reproduced well. I also realized that the other publication and their staff did not speak to me at all—and away they went. I became a *Stereophile* and specifically a Herb Reichert devotee, a fan-boy as it were, though we're of similar age. What he heard, I heard. What he liked, I liked. I tried many of his positively reviewed components and found them to be not only to my aural liking but a good fit for my lifestyle and philosophical tastes (tubes, smaller boutique-produced components).

So, once again, I am indebted to *Stereophile*, your Recommended Components, your staff, and especially Herb Reichert, for what is now an all–Class A system (Devore, Linear Tube Audio, Chord Electronics). The music is more beautiful than I ever dreamed it could be. Thank you, *Stereophile*, once again.

Michael Warne
Rockford, Michigan

Intangible files and tangible media

I enjoyed Jim Austin's provocative As We See It column, "The spaces between the notes," in the April 2023 issue. He reflects on the contrasting experiences of listening to disembodied digital musical files versus fixed musical tracks on LPs. Digital files promote a la carte listening: "It's too easy to move among favorite bits of our favorite music." In contrast, many of us miss the experience of listening all the way through an artfully curated LP where the artist chose to position tracks in a deliberate and aesthetic sequence. One good analogy is an art gallery or museum where both the position and sequence of artworks are carefully curated for an optimal aesthetic experience.

That said, I love the ability to curate my own listening experience by taking a tangential journey from one music file to another on a streaming service like Qobuz. I can be my own deejay, and I think I've become pretty good at it! Something lost, something gained.

Bruce Berlow
Santa Barbara, California

Re-Tales, Julie Mullins, and New England Hi-Fi

I grew up in Portland, Maine, and never left. The article by Julie Mullins in the May *Stereophile* was perfectly researched, as I lived everything you mentioned about New England Hi-Fi. I'm 66 now and knew Derek, and I know Andy. This is the store where I heard my first subwoofer, the David and Dahlquist. Most of my friends in the later '70s bought a Dual turntable, large Advents, and a Yamaha receiver there. Great job, Julie! I was there then and now. You nailed it!

Mark Korda
Portland, Maine

Make Your Own Kind of Music

Alex Halberstadt is on something, and it is not weed (Brilliant Corners, May 2023). Some of the older vinyl records I have still floor me compared to the audiophile ones I have been recently purchasing. I don't have "records to live (or die) for," as most popular music is a bit spotty with lots of filler material, with the possible exceptions of *The Dark Side of the Moon* by Pink Floyd and *Charli* by Charli XCX. I am reminded of Sturgeon's law, based on science fiction writer Theodore Sturgeon's reply to a fan. The fan said that 90% of the genre—science fiction—was crap. Without blinking, Sturgeon is said to have replied, "90% of everything is crap."

Parts of *The Game* by Queen sound incredible to me, as do parts of *Transit* by Ira Stein and Russel Walder, played on my 30-year-old Soundcraftsmen stereo separates and 20-year-old Klipsch speakers. But my current standard, played with a Grado cartridge, is something from Pete Fountain's *Make Your Own Kind of Music*, an easy-listening record from 1969. During the melodic cover of "Early in the Morning," the jazz-type band backing his clarinet seems to explode into the room from the thick vinyl disc onto which it was pressed. I guess that disc was audiophile before the word came into widespread use.

William A. Mendoza, PhD
Ponte Vedra, Florida

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Immersive Sol & Pat

I was excited to listen to *Sol & Pat* in Dolby Atmos based on Kal's description in the Arvus review (May 2023). However, when I went to stream it I found no Atmos version on Apple Music, only stereo. I also am not able to find any evidence of an Atmos mix existing on Google. What gives?

Matt Cohen
Hollywood, California

You probably can appreciate how surprised I was to find it and why I questioned how it got there. The Arvus had identified it as "Dolby Atmos (Multi-CH PCM)," which suggests that it may have been merely 5.1. That alone would be quite surprising since, as far as I know, Alpha Classics has released only one multichannel disc, ever.

It is also puzzling that it has disappeared. I asked Alpha Classics what happened to it and got no response.

—Kalman Rubinson

Trashy LPs

I read with interest Phil Brett's and Jim Austin's pieces about LPs, from both sides of the pond (My Back Pages and As We See It, September 2023). You are both right, by 1983, most LPs were trash. I was lucky. I started buying in the very early 1960s, 20 years earlier than you both.

One big difference is that discs from the mid-'50s to mid-'60s were much thicker and made from purer vinyl. The cutting machines were better quality, and fewer pressings were made from each mother and stamper. They had their great engineers too. Even against the best of today's reissues, some of the EMIs and especially the Deccas hold their own on sound quality. I know: I have many 100s of them, from all genres. Even the Beatles and the Stones sound excellent, I say better than the CDs. I never sold anything, and I still buy in thrifts from time to time.

Michael Quinlan
Reigate, Surrey, UK

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INDUSTRY UPDATE

AUDIO NEWS & VIEWS

SUBMISSIONS: Those promoting audio-related seminars, shows, and meetings should email the when, where, and who to stletters@stereophile.com at least eight weeks before the month of the event. The deadline for the February 2024 issue is November 20, 2023.

SONY INTERACTIVE ENTERTAINMENT ACQUIRES AUDEZE

Julie Mullins

Sony Interactive Entertainment LLC (SIE) announced in an August 24 press release that it had entered into an agreement to acquire Audeze, a well-established manufacturer of headphones and related speaker and driver technologies.

SIE, which is a wholly owned subsidiary of Sony Group Corporation, is probably best known for launching the PlayStation in Japan in 1994. Both companies are headquartered in California: Audeze in Santa Ana; SIE in San Mateo with "global functions" in London and Tokyo and game development studios in various other locations. Details about the transaction, including cost, were not disclosed. SIE is thought to be interested mainly in Audeze's experience creating headphones intended for gaming.

Stereophile received the following emailed comment from Audeze CEO Sankar Thiagasamudram: "Our business name will remain Audeze, and even under SIE's ownership, this will not affect our plans for products that support multiple platforms and technologies, including PC, Xbox, or Dolby Atmos. In fact, SIE encourages us to expand these product offerings, and you should expect us to continue releasing new products for the Audiophile, Pro Audio, and Gaming markets in the future. This acquisition will only enhance our efforts and provide ... more opportunities in our target markets. Audeze will continue to operate independently as a separate business of SIE.

"For you and our customers, it will be business as usual—sales, marketing, production, and customer service will continue as normal. On the manufacturing and engineering side, this is where you'll see greater growth. Current Audeze senior management will continue (co-founders Sankar and Drag will be staying as well as Mark), as will our existing sales and customer service personnel."

MONARCH BRINGS AUDIO PHYSIC BACK TO THE US

Julie Mullins

Monarch Systems Ltd. has been busy lately. In our October issue, we reported the Englewood, Colorado–based company's announcement of the opening of their "La Casita" showroom, a "residential" demo facility near Santa Fe, New Mexico, and that Monarch had picked up distribution of products from B Audio, a French manufacturer of digital sources and amplification.

Now Monarch has added Audio Physic to its distribution roster, marking the German brand's return to the US after about a two-year absence. Headquartered in Brilon, Germany, Audio Physic was founded in 1986 by a team of engineers headed by Joachim Gerhard and Willi Hegener, the release stated. Longtime product engineer Manfred Diestertich, who's credited with developing many of the company's innovative driver and cabinet designs using new materials, maintains a leadership role today. Audio Physic is best known for audiophile loudspeakers, but they also make subwoofers, home theater/custom installation solutions, and audio accessories.

Monarch Systems Ltd. began handling the importation of Audio Physic products, establishing retail sales networks, and pursuing marketing channels on September 18.

OHM ACOUSTICS IS FOR SALE

Julie Mullins

Want to buy a loudspeaker company? Brooklyn-based Ohm Acoustics is up for sale. The company announced it was having issues with parts supply earlier this

CALENDAR OF INDUSTRY EVENTS

ATTENTION ALL AUDIO SOCIETIES: We have a page on the *Stereophile* website devoted to you: stereophile.com/audiophile-societies. If you'd like to have your audio-society information posted on the site, email Chris Vogel at vgl@cfl.rr.com.

It is inappropriate for a retailer to promote a new product line in "Calendar" unless it is associated with a seminar or similar event.

CALIFORNIA AND THE INTERWEBS

■ Friday evenings, 5–7pm PST: The San Francisco Audiophile Society hosts a virtual happy hour via Zoom. This is open to anyone who'd like to join us to talk about hi-fi and whatever else is on your mind. For more information and registration, visit bit.ly/3RyaqX9.

COLORADO

■ Monday, October 30, 6–9pm: Fort Collins specialty audio retailer Audio Alternative (1849 Michael Ln., Fort Collins, Colorado) will host Richard Vandersteen, founder and head engineer of Vandersteen Audio, and Brad O'Toole, Vandersteen's global sales director. After a brief presentation and Q&A comes the sonic unveiling of the all-new L5-ACC Audio Control Center Preamp. This system will feature fully powered Vandersteen loudspeakers employing the Vandersteen High-Pass Amps (HPA models). In addition, O'Toole will discuss and demonstrate HRS stands and chassis noise reduction products in an interactive listening session. Please RSVP at sales@audioalternative.com.

FLORIDA

■ February 16–18, 2024: The Florida Audio Expo will take place at the Embassy Suites by Hilton Tampa Westshore, 555 N. Westshore Blvd., Tampa, Florida. For more information, see floridaaudioexpo.com/contact-us.

GEORGIA

■ Thursday, November 2, 2023, 6–9pm: Atlanta specialty audio retailer HiFi Buys Atlanta (3157 Peachtree Rd. NE, Atlanta, Georgia) welcomes Richard Vandersteen, founder and head engineer of Vandersteen Audio, and Global Sales Director Brad O'Toole. After a brief presentation and Q&A, there will be a premier sonic unveiling of the all-new L5-ACC Audio Control Center Preamp. The system will feature fully powered Vandersteen loudspeakers employing Vandersteen High-Pass Amps. Brad O'Toole will discuss and demonstrate HRS stands and chassis noise reduction products in an interactive listening session. Please RSVP at hifibuys.com/events.

ILLINOIS

■ Saturday, October 7, noon–5pm: Quintessence Audio (5701 W. Dempster

CONTINUED ON PAGE 14

year, and perusing their website suggests that the company currently has a limited inventory of new products.

The news of the possible sale came to *Stereophile*'s attention via a BizQuest listing,[1] which indicates that the owner is seeking to sell his business because he wants to retire. "The seller will provide hands-on training to ensure a smooth transition," the listing states. When we last looked in early September, the asking price was $875,000. Gross revenue was specified as $900,000/year; $70,000 in inventory is not included in the price. Ohm Acoustics has been in business since 1972 and operates a 5000ft2 facility in Brooklyn. Neither Ohm Acoustics nor the broker in charge of the sale responded to *Stereophile*'s queries via phone or email.

1 See bizquest.com/business-for-sale/custom-speaker-manufacturer-brooklyn-new-york/BW2084589.

GARMIN TO ACQUIRE JL AUDIO

Julie Mullins

Garmin Ltd., a Swiss tech solutions company with principal subsidiaries in the US, Taiwan, and the UK, has committed to purchasing JL Audio. Based in Miramar, Florida, JL Audio serves marine, aftermarket automotive, powersports, home, and RV customers.

A JL Audio representative did not respond to *Stereophile*'s emailed request for comment, but according to a joint press release, "all existing JL Audio products will continue to be supported post-closing, and customers can expect to continue receiving the same great customer service. ... Financial terms of the acquisition will not be disclosed." Assuming all regulatory and closing considerations are approved, the deal is expected to be completed by the end of 2023.

HYPERION STREAMS AT LAST

Jason Victor Serinus

Four months after Hyperion, the formerly independent, UK-based classical label, was bought by the industry-dominating Universal Music Group, its started to release its catalog of more than 2000 albums. Titles will appear in increments of 200 every two weeks until the whole catalog is available to stream, which should happen sometime in spring 2024.

Assembled over the 43 years since Ted Perry founded the label, Hyperion's roster of artists and titles is among the most significant worldwide. The Hyperion catalog includes such important living keyboardists as Mahan Esfahani, Marc-André Hamelin, Angela Hewitt, Sir Stephen Hough, Garrick Ohlsson, Steven Osborne, Howard Shelley, and Cédric Tiberghien. String players include violinist Alina Ibragimova and cellist Steven Isserlis. Hyperion ensembles of note include Arcangelo, Cinquecento, Polyphony, Takács Quartet, The Cardinall's Musick, and a host of British choral ensembles and orchestras. It is thrilling to finally gain streaming access to Graham Johnson's impeccably annotated *Complete Schubert Song Edition*—a 40-album collection whose early contributors included Elly Ameling, Arleen Auger, and the young Ian Bostridge—and parallel collections of songs by Strauss, Brahms, Fauré, and others. If streaming services also make available Johnson's erudite liner notes,[2] we will finally be able to access collections as important as those recorded by the legendary Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau and Elisabeth Schwarzkopf with the greatest accompanists of their eras.

The great early-music soprano Emma Kirby made many recordings for Hyperion, and soprano Carolyn Sampson and countertenor Iestyn Davies continue to add to their discographies on the label. How many people have had their lives enriched by Gothic Voices' legendary Hildegard von Bingen collection, *A Feather on the Breath of God*? Expect it all to appear online at a pace faster than most of us can absorb.

2 On a first look, there's excellent news on this front, but only for Qobuz subscribers. A sampling of a few early Hyperion streaming releases found booklet pdfs attached, including Dame Janet Baker's and Graham Johnson's *Goethe and Schiller Settings* (sampled via Roon). But only the Qobuz streams included the booklets—no booklets from Tidal. **—Jim Austin**

MARANTZ OFFERS TRADE-IN PROGRAM—AND A NEW RECEIVER

Julie Mullins

Marantz has announced a trade-in program to coincide with the company's 70th anniversary—aptly called "70 Days for 70 Years." The offer is limited in time—yes, 70 days—and comes with some caveats. Here's how it works: Customers can visit Marantz's website, locate their nearest participating dealer, then bring their used Marantz component (in any condition) to the dealer for evaluation. The dealer's assessment will determine eligibility for a credit toward purchase—up to 20% off 15 eligible Marantz components. The 70 days started September 1; by my calculation, that

[Continued from page 13]

Ave., Morton Grove, Illinois) in the Chicago area welcomes special guest Robert Suchy, managing director of Clearaudio, for our annual Analog Open House. Guests Garth Leerer and Ken Bowers of Musical Surroundings will demonstrate the latest products from DS Audio along with Clearaudio turntables. A drawing will be held for a Hana EL phono cartridge and copies of the *Clearaudio 45th Jubilee* double LP. Refreshments will be served. Please RSVP at (847) 966-4434 or via email to sales@quintessenceaudio.com.

■ Thursday, October 12, 11am–9pm: Holm Audio (2050 W. 75th St., Woodridge, Illinois) hosts a musical event with representatives from Electrocompaniet (Lasse Danielsen from Norway), Triangle Speakers (Frank Gazzo), Lumin and Puritan Audio Labs (Brian Tucker), Nordost (Mike Marko), SOTA Turntables (Donna Bodinet), and Kirmuss (Charles Kirmuss) showcasing their latest offerings. Attendees are encouraged to bring a favorite LP to be restored by the Kirmuss process. Door prizes will be given away to every attendee, and more than $2000 worth of audio goodies will be raffled off. Reservations required: Call Holm Audio at (630) 663-1298.

TEXAS

■ March 15–17, 2024: This new show from the team behind the Capital and Pacific Audio Fests will take place at the Anatole/Hilton in Dallas. For more information, see southwestaudiofest.com or contact Gary Gill or Lou Hinkley at capitalaudiofest@gmail.com or lou@pacificaudiofest.com.

WASHINGTON, DC, AREA

■ November 10–12, 2023: The Capital Audiofest will take place at the Twinbrook Hilton at 1750 Rockville Pike, Rockville, Maryland. For more information, see the website at capitalaudiofest.com or contact Gary Gill by email at capitalaudiofest@gmail.com.

TORONTO, CANADA

■ October 20–22, 2023: The Toronto Audiofest will be held at the Westin Toronto Airport Hotel (950 Dixon Rd., Etobicoke, Ontario). For more information, check out the website at torontoaudiofest.org or contact Sarah Tremblay or Michel Plante by email at sarah@torontoaudiofest.org or mplante@torontoaudiofest.org, respectively.

takes it through November 9, though the offer could be extended. Additional details are available at Marantz's official website, located at marantz.com.

Marantz also announced the release of a new "slimline" network receiver, the Stereo 70s, which has the same characteristic look as other recent Marantz components in a slightly smaller package. Said to be aimed at "Sound Enthusiasts + Luxury Indulgers," it's intended as an all-rounder for two-channel hi-fi and home theater deployment, with plenty of inputs and outputs: six HDMI inputs (three of which are 8K compatible) plus one HDMI ARC; optical (TosLink) and electrical (coaxial) S/PDIF inputs plus Ethernet for network. It's also equipped with three pairs of analog inputs on RCA plus preamplifier (line-level) and two subwoofer outputs. The DAC/streamer supports playback of PCM files up to 24/192 and DSD128 as well as lossy formats. There's a low-latency mode for gaming. Firmware updates are available over network or USB.

You can connect two pairs of loudspeakers at once and play them either separately (4–16-ohm impedance per speaker) or simultaneously (8–16-ohm impedance). Despite the home theater emphasis, it's not multichannel—just two plus two line-level subwoofer connections. Although details were not provided, Marantz literature says that you can "tune bass to perfection using extensive speaker and subwoofer configuration options accessible through the menu."

According to Marantz's online specs, the class-AB amp's output power is rated at 75Wpc into 8 ohms or 100Wpc into 6 ohms, rated with a 1kHz sinewave at input.

Like many Marantz products, the Stereo 70s uses Hyper Dynamic Amplifier Modules (HDAM), which feature custom-selected surface-mounted parts and short signal paths; the company says they outperform chip-based op-amps. The receiver contains HEOS Built-In technology for music streaming and multiroom playback (with other HEOS-enabled devices). There's even a moving magnet phono input and—surprise—an AM/FM tuner. The 70s should be available by the time this news hits print, at the modest price of $1000.

SCHIIT AUDIO RELEASES A NEW CD TRANSPORT/ DIGITAL HUB

Julie Mullins

Schiit Audio is releasing a new CD transport with USB connectivity. The company calls it the "Urd CD transport and Unison USB hub," a mouthful. Bring your own DAC and streamer, as there are none onboard.

A recent phone conversation with Schiit co-founder Jason Stoddard shed some light on the unusual offering. "People are really excited about CD," Stoddard told *Stereophile*. "And [Schiit co-founder/designer] Mike Moffat had wanted to do a CD player

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with a USB output for a long time. He likes USB better than anything else. But I don't think we realized how crazy it was going to be."

What makes the Urd/Unison unique among digital disc transports is that, in addition to the usual digital outputs, it also includes digital inputs, two of them, both USB-C, supporting PCM data rates up to 32/192.

It's not a streamer, but it can work with one. It doesn't include a computer, but it can work with one. Schiit considered including a streamer and played around with some, but they decided against it. "Let's let them settle the streaming wars first," Stoddard said.

Schiit also wanted to avoid anything with an operating system. "No one's going to have to worry about a security patch." They also didn't want to get into the business of developing apps and user interfaces. "We're kind of old-fashioned," he said. "We don't like apps, we don't like general-purpose computers all that much, so we are kind of backwards in some respects."

The Urd transport uses an old-school, high-quality CD drive, which loads the CD with a metal tray, and there's a servo control board, both made by Stream Unlimited. It doesn't play SACD or MQA-CD, just "Red Book" CDs.

The two USB-C inputs and the USB output are Schiit's own "Unison" design. Asked for specifics, Stoddard, who is not a designer, pleaded ignorance, saying he hasn't gotten a straight answer, but there could be a secret sauce.

Outputs include USB-C, AES3, and coaxial S/PDIF. Moffat doesn't like TosLink due to its bandwidth limitations. Like the inputs, all the Urd/Unison's outputs support PCM data rates up to 32/192. All are transformer-isolated to reduce noise.

The Urd/Unison comes with an AC power cord and costs $1299. Shipping starts in October, but if you want one, you might have to wait: Urds are "heavily backordered." Stoddard assured me though that Schiit is stepping up production to address this. The Urd/Unison is made in the US.

Stoddard said he was skeptical of the Urd at first but quickly became a convert. "It's a perfectly normal reaction to go, 'This thing is weird,'" he said. "But I'm happy we did it, and it will stay in the line."

QUAD REVEALS THE REVELA SPEAKER LINE

Julie Mullins

When I think of Quad speakers, I think of the classic electrostatics, Peter Walker's fabled ESL-57 and its successors. While the British company still produces electrostatic models (specifically the ESL-2812 and -2912), they also make a diverse array of dynamic-driver speakers. Their latest is the Revela line, which includes two models: the two-way, stand-mount Revela 1 and the three-way, floorstanding Revela 2. Both are bass-reflex designs; the former has a single rear port, while the latter has two ports, also in the rear. Like Quad's flagship Z-series, the Revelas combine dynamic drivers with a "true ribbon" tweeter; the new tweeter has a reinforced sandwich diaphragm that renders it "capable of handling the demands of modern music and the higher power output of contemporary solid-state amplifiers without mechanical failure."

The midrange and bass drivers have also received updates: Their diaphragms use a newly developed "unique formulation of wood pulp and other fibers" called Reveal—hence "Revela"—due to its "natural, transparent, and detailed output." Among the fibers added to the pulp are artificial ones including para-aramids, reported to provide strength and improved damping.

The Revelas are said to use phase-compensated Butterworth crossovers, fine-tuned in-house. Sensitivity is specified at 86dB and 89dB respectively—both rated at 2.83V at 1m. Both have a 6-ohm nominal impedance.

The Revela models come in lacquered black or walnut finishes; "Walnut" is actually a "striking combination of wood veneer interlinked with piano black." For the Revela 1 ($2250/pair), Quad has made optional, custom stands ($745 with speaker purchase), which are made from laminated wood on a carbon steel base. The Revela 2 ($4495/pair) comes with a carbon steel plinth with stainless steel spikes. New electronics are expected before year's end.

HIFI ROSE'S RS130 ULTIMATE NETWORK TRANSPORT

Jason Victor Serinus

When MoFi Distribution declares a hi-fi product "ultimate," it's natural to be intrigued. The product in question is HiFi Rose's first network transport, the RS130 ($5195). MoFi says the all-digital music server—it has no D/A converter—uses a length of fiberoptic network cable optical USB "to separate pure data from driving noise, ensuring only flawless sound reaches your DAC." Optical converter modules, sold separately, are required to take full advantage of these connections.

The RS130 contains an "overbuilt" linear power supply featuring supercapacitors, which MoFi VP of Sales & Marketing Jon

Derda says operate much like a noise-free battery power supply. Also onboard the RS130 is an "ultra-high-precision OCXO clock to transport digital audio signals through its outputs with an accuracy previously considered unachievable." Its internal non-volatile memory express protocol (NVMe) SSD memory-caching system is said to help achieve stable playback and transcend brief signal dropouts.

A full-color touchscreen covers the full width of the RS130's 15.4" front panel. If desired, the information on the touchscreen can be displayed on an external monitor via an HDMI cable. The unit utilizes Rose OS, a "heavily customized" version of Android OS 7.1. Control is via the Rose Connect controller app, an included IR/Bluetooth remote control, or crystal control buttons on the front panel. The Roon Ready network transport's streaming protocols include AirPlay 2, DNLA, and Bluetooth, and it also supports Spotify Connect, Tidal, Qobuz, Spotify, and Apple Music. This last bit is especially notable, since support for Apple Music is rare in serious hi-fi. The RS130 supports sample rates up to PCM 32/768 and DSD512. Outputs include optical, coaxial, AES3, and I²S-HDMI.

LUMIN MUSIC INTRODUCES THE D3 MUSIC STREAMER

Jason Victor Serinus

Lumin's new, entry-level D3 music streamer/renderer/DAC ($2600) incorporates fully balanced, dual mono circuitry and the ESS Sabre ES9028PRO DAC chip, which is said to offer improved resampling flexibility. The D3 is conceived, Lumin says, to bring "the audiophile potential of music streaming within everyone's reach."

The 5.5lb D3 has both analog and digital outputs, a reconfigured analog output stage, a redesigned analog buffer, and a new surface finish. It has both RCA and XLR analog outputs and an electrical S/PDIF digital output on a BNC connector, which transmits PCM data at rates ranging from 16/44.1 to 24/192. It also plays back single-rate DSD via DoP. Control is via the Lumin app, which can run on devices from Apple (iOS11 or above) or Android (4.0 or above).

The D3 can upsample any file in a supported format to either DSD256 or 32/384 PCM. The D3 is compatible with Tidal Connect, Spotify Connect, and AirPlay 2 and is Roon Ready. It also works with Qobuz, Plex, and TuneIn radio and handles MQA. All Lumin products support LEEDH digital signal processing, which, according to Mark Gurvey, Lumin's US importer, "basically eliminates coloration associated with a preamp by addressing bit truncation." ■

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GRAMOPHONE DREAMS

BY HERB REICHERT

THIS ISSUE: Herb auditions the new, old-school "banana" tonearm from EMT with the EMT JSD 6 phono cartridge.

The EMT Experience

If you've read any of my previous Dreams, you no doubt realize that I am an empiricist by trade—that I believe in the value of relaxed, mindful observation, especially if my solitary observances are independently corroborated by others. Whenever possible, I test my observations by getting either the Spin Doctor, the Audiophiliac, or my Russian neighbor to listen and tell me what *they* notice. If they notice the same things I noticed, independently, I relax. Corroboration is important because when I submit a review, I have an obligation to get it right. I need to be confident that readers, when they listen, will likely hear the same thing I heard, for themselves.

After a review is submitted, my opinion about a product evolves, getting better or worse with further use or, after a product is gone, with further thought. For example, every time I use Denafrips' Terminator Plus DAC or HoloAudio Serene preamp—which lately is every day—each seems more musically and sonically unassailable than they seemed as I reviewed them. By "unassailable," I mean I can't imagine other people using them in their own systems and not being pleased with what they do and don't do, especially at their prices.

DR. FEICKERT

Which reminds me of another product I've used for a long while, the axis mundi of my review system, a product I've used daily for almost five years: Dr. Feickert Analogue's made-in-Germany, three-speed, dual-motor, dual-armboard, belt-driven Blackbird turntable. I did not fully appreciate its virtues until I finished and submitted my report on PTP Audio's Solid9 idler-drive turntable.[1]

Since I first described the Blackbird in 2018 (Gramophone Dreams #25[2]), the Blackbird's dual high-torque three-phase Papst motors and its 2"-thick Delrin-and-brass platter have persuaded me to keep my Thorens TD124 and Linn Sondek LP12 (mostly) under my bed by spinning records with steady, torque-enforced fortitude.

During my PTP Audio Solid9 auditions, I noticed that the belt-drive Blackbird moved music forward with a force and momentum that felt remarkably similar to that of the PTP idler-drive, which sounded remarkably close, PRaTwise, to my friend Yale's EMT 930.

A major contributor to that similar sound is, I am sure, the coercive pull of the Blackbird's motors. Long-term use, though, has convinced me that another contributor to the Blackbird's quiet, solid sound is the way the platter mates the record. When I put a flat record on its bare surface and tap it all around with my fingernail, it sounds *really dead*, suggesting that the platter and disc have mated evenly and effectively. "Really dead" becomes even more dead when I tap the disc after adding the Feickert clamp, which I routinely tighten just to the lighter side of snug.

I have now used the Blackbird with dozens of cartridges and three tonearms: the 12" Jelco TK-850L, the 10.5" Thomas Schick, and now, for this report, EMT's new, improved "banana," the 912-HI, equipped with the JSD 6 moving coil cartridge.

With its satin-feel knife-edge bearings, H4 headshell, and deluxe antiskate and arm-lift mechanisms, the made-in-Japan Jelco TK-850L was an absolute joy. It looked and felt well-built, adapted to every cartridge I tried, and tracked and traced with bright, luminous precision. I was crestfallen when Jelco closed, in 2020.

That is when I switched to the Schick 10.5" tonearm. Its creator, Thomas Schick, is a respected engineer. His simple, unaffected design, use of top-quality ball-and-race bearings, and $1995 price make the Schick arms, which come in three lengths, a high-quality, high-value offering from one of the best minds in German analog. In my system, the midlength, medium-mass 10.5" arm has matched well with cartridges of diverse weights and compliances. It has been my everyday reference arm since 2020.

Just when my brain fell into a null, thinking, "That's it. I know what the Feickert turntable sounds like, and I know how good the Schick arm is," EMT's new 912-HI tonearm arrived and, together with the EMT JSD 6 cartridge, threw everything I thought I knew out the window. Suddenly, every record sounded dramatically more exposed than I remembered it, clearer and punchier. So much changed that I found it was exciting and unsettling. It took a couple of weeks—trying different phono stages, cartridge loadings, and step-up transformers—to settle in comfortably with the new EMT sound.

1 See stereophile.com/content/gramophone-dreams-73-ptp-audio-solid9-turntable-sorane-sa-12-tonearm.

2 See stereophile.com/content/gramophone-dreams-25-dr-feickert-jelco-koetsu-my-sonic-lab.

THE EMT 912-HI TONEARM

During the 1980s, my professional activities included buying and selling used Garrard 301 and Thorens TD-124 turntables. During that time, I began to aspire to own what I imagined as the next step up from vintage Garrard or Thorens. I lusted for a vintage record player manufactured in Lahr, Germany, by Elektromesstechnik, also known as EMT.

Those EMT record players look so extreme-duty, sexy-tech cool that, back then, my hands shook whenever I saw photos of a 927 or 930. In my mind, EMT products have always seemed an apex of analog engineering and industrial design.

Elektromesstechnik introduced its first record player, the broadcast-quality 927, in 1951. Its massive iron, aluminum, and Bakelite chassis measured 27" × 21" × 8.5" and weighed 80lb.[3] It made consumer decks look like toys. Its heavy, cast-aluminum platter looked like a repurposed mag wheel from a German touring car. It—the platter alone—measured a whopping 17" in diameter and featured a bearing shaft 6.6" long and 0.79" in diameter. Sitting on top of the mag-spoked platter was a thick, rubber-and-mirrorglass platter plate. The 927 came with a 12", Ortofon-sourced tonearm called the RF-297. That 'arm was later replaced by a stereo version called the RMA-297. Those arms were configured to be used with Ortofon-sourced, EMT-branded cartridges, all of which had quick-release headshells, tracked above 2.2gm, and included no provision for antiskate.

In 1974, EMT began manufacturing its own version of the Ortofon-sourced 297 tonearm, the 997. The 997 was designed to operate with a pivot–spindle distance of 297mm, exactly the same as the 297. But unlike the original, Ortofon-sourced arm, which was straight with a bend at the end, EMT's 997 featured an aesthetically pleasing curve. Versions of the EMT "banana" arm stayed in production until 2008, when, according to Art Dudley,[4] with the assistance of Keith Aschenbrenner of design-and-distribution firm Auditorium 23, EMT teamed up with retired EMT production foreman Rudi Glaser and brought out an "updated" 997, which came in two versions. One was nearly identical to the original, with headshell-connector pins configured for use with EMT pickups. The second version featured the near-universal pin configuration found on SME tonearms. These arms stayed in production for 10 years until 2018, when the EMT team began working on a new tonearm series with 21st century technology.

According to the EMT-Tontechnik website, in recent years EMT's cartridge manufacturing has been gradually transferred from Mahlberg, Germany, to Micha Huber's HiFiction AG facility in Turbenthal, Switzerland.[5] Now, Huber says, "all EMT products currently listed on our website (emt-tontechnik.ch) are fully manufactured in house at HiFiction AG."

In October 2022, EMT/HiFiction AD released re-engineered versions of the 929 and 997 tonearms. The 12" model is the 912. The 9" model is now called the 909. Each comes in two versions, one with a fixed

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headshell ("HI"), the other with a quick-coupling system that fits the EMT Tondose's four-pin diamond pattern ("Professional"); there's a variant that fits Ortofon's square pin-mounting pattern. There is no provision for G-style Ortofon cartridges; only the shorter, 32mm A-style cartridges are compatible. All variations are available with the standard, fixed-wire output or with a 5-pin DIN connector. The 912-HI with fixed headshell costs $6995 with fixed wire, $7409 with the DIN connector. The 912 with the quick-coupling connection is $6495 with fixed wire, $7095 with DIN. The 909-HI with a fixed headshell is $5995; with the DIN output, it costs $6495. The fixed-head 909 costs $5995 fixed, $6495 DIN. As with the earlier EMT arms, only the 12" version has the "banana" shape; the 9" 'arm features a gentle s-curve.

If you stand back a few feet and don't look too closely at the top of the bearing housing cover, the 912-HI looks much like a classic 997. Look closer, and you notice some differences. The newer version is sleeker, sexier, more refined in machining and finish. Spin Doctor Michael Trei opined that the 912 "seems better built" than any of the many 997s he has installed.

EMT's new arms have eliminated the original's spring-loaded tracking-force mechanism, replacing it with a new, dual-axis ball bearing technology, which I suspect is the new arm's *raison d'être*. They've added a dial-operated magnetic antiskating mechanism that allows users to use cartridges with a wider range of specifications.

3 See enjoythemusic.com/magazine/sound_practices/16/EMT_927_EMT_930_Turntables.htm.

4 See stereophile.com/content/listening-151.

5 See emt-tontechnik.ch/files/productfile/Launch-EMT-Tonearm.pdf.

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There is a beautifully machined threaded ring for VTA adjustment and a hydraulic tonearm lift that can be removed if the tonearm is used on vintage EMT turntables equipped with built-in lifting devices.

The review sample of the 912-HI featured the DIN output. I connected it to a 1.5m Cardas Clear Beyond tonearm cable. The whole system was wired with a full loom of Cardas Clear Beyond; I also tried it with Ikigai Audio Kangai-level interconnects and speaker cables.

Arm installation

One of the bigger reasons the Feickert Blackbird is the centerpiece of my reference system is that I love how easy it makes installing tonearms. I simply bolted the EMT arm's base to the MoFi-supplied 9mm thick upper armboard disc, which came predrilled for the 912. I joined it to the Feickert's 7mm-thick bottom disc, which mates the armboard disk to the calibrated (205–320mm) lozenge-shaped cutout in the plinth's rear corner. Before tightening these disc's cap screws, I aligned the bottom disk's indicator lines with the 297mm mark on each side of the cutout. That number corresponds with the tonearm's 297mm spindle-to-pivot distance. That accomplished, I stood back and admired how sleek this Swiss arm looked on the minimalist German deck. To my eyes, the EMT 912-HI arm made the Dr. Feickert Blackbird look more of a piece, more luxuriously appointed than it looked with the Jelco or Schick arms.

EMT JSD 6 MOVING COIL CARTRIDGE

My goal for this column was not to compare the not-free EMT tonearm to the not-very-expensive Jelco or Schick arms. Those comparisons would be interesting but difficult to make. As of this writing, I have only listened to the 912-HI tonearm with EMT's own JSD 6 cartridge, and I have only listened to that cartridge with this tonearm. So I cannot separate the sonic impact of the tonearm from that of the cartridge. If the creek don't rise, in Dreams to come, I will report how a few of my favorite cartridges responded to the 912-HI. In this column, I'll describe what I heard and the feelings that resulted as I played records all day every day, first as the cartridge was breaking in, then to get a feel for how different it sounded and felt from what I'd been using previously.

With their matching aluminum bodies, the $3195 JSD 6 looks exactly like its boron-cantilevered twin, the $3795 JSD 5. The chief difference is the stylus: the JSD 5's uses an "MR" (multiradius) stylus and the JSD 6 uses a high-polish Super Fine Line (SFL) stylus. The numbers, 5 and 6, refer to the stylus-tip radius of each cartridge, in microns. Otherwise, their specifications match: Both use gold-plated AlNiCo magnets, both weigh 10gm, both have the same low compliance—12µm/mN—and somewhat-low output voltage: 1.05mV @ 5cm/s. According to the specifications, both cartridges have source impedance of 24 ohms; loading at 200–300 ohms is recommended.

Cartridge alignment

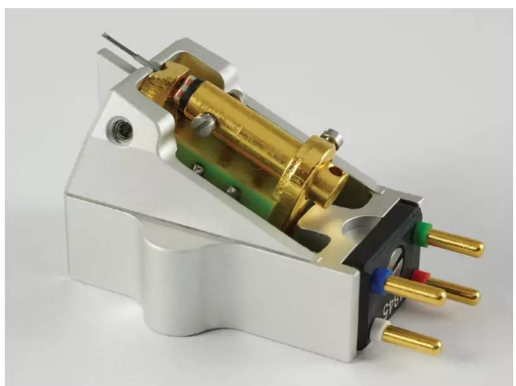
I used Feickert's record-thick aluminum alignment protractor (included with the Blackbird turntable) to install the JSD 6, setting overhang and zenith. I used Musical Surroundings' V2 Fozgometer to set azimuth.

In setting up a phono cartridge, aligning its electromechanical system to known Cartesian parameters is just the starting point. I do not presume that my home-brew approximation guarantees minimum distortion, optimal tracking, or maximum listening pleasure. Those things—especially the latter—I optimize by listening. I often start my listening analytics with Shure's Era IV *Audio Obstacle Course* (Shure LP TTR115). Yes, I do play those famous (to old audiophiles) orchestral bells, flute, and harp tracks at all five levels, knowing that when they sound clean and undistorted, my other records will sound that way, too. Not to mention that Level 5 always reminds me how much I enjoy the vivid, forceful sound of wide grooves and high stylus velocities. EMT's 912-HI arm and JSD 6 cartridge sailed through these demanding tracks, sounding relaxed and naturally toned.

The JSD 6 specifies a tracking force of 2.4gm, ±0.1gm, reminding me that EMT chose to forgo antiskate on the original 997 because the arm was designed for cartridges with tracking forces greater than 2.2gm; antiskate matters less with heavier-tracking cartridges. With the new 912, there's an antiskate setting dial, but there is no mention of antiskate in the otherwise excellent owner's manual.

I've always been stingy with antiskate. I use Frank Schröder's method, setting it so that the antiskate mechanism is sufficient to pull the cartridge/arm slowly toward the label on a blank, grooveless disc. With the EMT 'arm and the JSD 6 cartridge, this effect was achieved with a dial setting between 2 and 3.

Over the course of these auditions, I tried most of my in-house tube and solid state phono-preamp options and experimentally loaded the JSD 6 at between 100 and 500 ohms. Regardless of which phono preamp I used, I thought the JSD 6 sounded most naturally detailed at 200 ohms.



I started my auditions with the JSD 6 directly connected to the transformer-coupled moving coil input of the Tavish Design Adagio, which played tight, fast, and über tuneful. I found, though, that the music sounded clearer and punchier with the JSD 6 feeding either of my two favorite solid state phono stages: the Parasound JC 3+ or the Kitsuné HiFi KTE LCR-1 MK5 LCR.

But! For my Herb-taste, a tubed phono stage added a measure of flux, flow, and luminous glow that I felt subdued the EMT's tendency to sound gray and tense, pushing it instead toward a relaxed, color-saturated presentation. I ended up preferring the JSD 6 with Lundahl's silver-wire, amorphous-core LL1931Ag step-up transformer feeding the SunValley EQ1616D equipped with vintage smooth-plate Telefunken 12AX7 tubes, via its moving magnet input. Tubes seemed to beautify without reducing the JSD 6's resolving prowess.

Because I like sound systems that

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play with resolve and intensity, I complemented the Lundahl and SunValley phono with the HoloAudio Serene preamp feeding Elekit's TU-8900 power amp (fitted with RCA 2A3s) and Heretic's AD614 speakers. The observations below were all made with that setup.

Listening

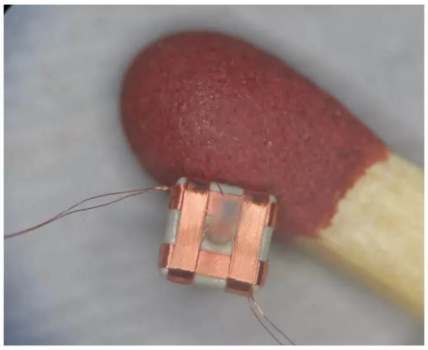
Historically, I've viewed EMT's house sound as a relatively stark, mastering-studio sound that feels like it's getting to the meaty essence of what was carved into the disc, no fragrance added. The JSD 6 was like that, but vocal and instrumental textures were portrayed in a much more supple and grainless fashion than with the TSD 15 and TSD 75 I am more familiar with.

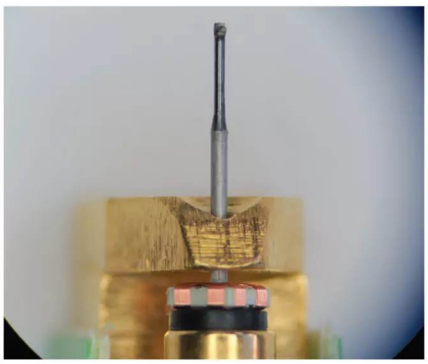
The JSD 6 played with more dimensionality and finer resolve, in the manner of today's top-line moving coil cartridges. When I first started using it, I thought the JSD 6 sounded like a top-shelf Ortofon or Lyra moving coil. It exposed the inner constructions of the mad-bright mix of Dr. John's *In The Right Place* (Atko Records LP SD 7018) to an extreme degree. I've played this album a hundred times, always enjoying how Allen Toussaint's conga drums (!), George "Freak Man" Porter's bass, and Joseph "Zigaboo" Modeliste's drums came through so raw and funky-punchy. With these new EMT bits, it still felt raw and funky but also like I was listening to a 1970s multitrack recording through a laboratory-grade magnifier. At that point, the JSD 6 had fewer than 10 hours on it. The more hours I put on it, the more it relaxed, opened up, and gained color.

With the JSD 6 well broken in, this classic album, produced by Toussaint, sounded like I imagined it did at Miami's Criteria Sound Studios in 1973 when Kari Richardson recorded it. (Criteria Sound was sometimes called "Atlantic Studios South" because Jerry Wexler and Tom Dowd made a lot of records there between 1970 and 1975.)

With the JSD 6, every sound seemed more crisply discernable and dimensional than I remember it being during my previous decades playing this album. I felt I was hearing the inside "view" of how *In the Right Place* was put together, which was fun, and enjoying (or sometimes not) the full-on solid state–ness of Criteria's recording chain. It seemed like the JSD 6 exposed everything in the record grooves, emphasizing the carny-talker side of Mac Rebennack's stage persona, "Dr. John."

My aesthetic viewpoint has been affected heavily by Russian filmmaker Andrei Tarkovsky and Hungarian filmmaker Béla Tarr. Their dark, post-traumatic visions,





intensified by long silences, encourage philosophical speculation and achieve the exact mood I'm after in my own art. I find that same type of mind space in the compositions of Swedish composer Allan Pettersson (1911–1980). Pettersson uses song the same way Béla and Andrei use silence: to trance the listener and keep their imaginings focused on art's three graces, space, time, and sacredness.

My current favorite Pettersson disc is a stunning BIS recording of his cantata "Vox Humana," for soloists, choir, and orchestra (BIS LP-55 Stereo, reissued in the US as HNH 4047). With the JSD 6 cartridge and 912-HI tonearm, the Feickert caused this BIS recording to read emotionally darker, more pessimistic than mystical, more dryly existential. Sonics-wise, it was more under-the-rock exposed than I remember it from my past. Detail was delicately layered and naturally formed. As hours accumulated on the cartridge, it approached phantasmagoric.

I played records from every music genre. The EMT arm and cartridge made dub reggae sound extra special, tight and just right. That may have been partly because I was driving the Heretic AD614 speakers 10dB louder than usual. When I played Winston Rodney's "Tradition" and "2000 Years," off Burning Spear's 1975 Island Records EP *Marcus Garvey* (Island 12 IS 332), I was gobsmacked at how cleanly the JSD 6 exposed every sound burst and every loop and track in this complex mix. In the setup section of this column, I mentioned how I like wide grooves and high stylus velocities; well, when you hold this beautiful 12", 45rpm disc in your hands, you can *look into* its wide grooves and imagine how fast your stylus will travel.

When I've played this Burning Spear 12-incher in the past, the extreme density of information in its echo-drenched sound collages sounded messy and distorted. Not with the JSD 6. I observed no blurring, intermodulation distortion, or mistracking—just finely woven, finely detailed protest dub.

This was also the record where the EMT arm and cartridge showed me the deepest, cleanest, most powerful bass I've encountered with the Heretic AD814s. For comparison, Shure's V15 III (on the Schick arm with a new Jico stylus) did not show me more bass and did not trace these wide grooves more accurately or play this record with greater resolve than the JSD 6. The Feickert-EMT record player played this iconic recording with a suave command that, for me, was the high point and defining moment of these auditions.

Conclusion

In my mind, the best record players are the ones that force me to like—and to listen to with interest at length—recordings and music types I would not have enjoyed on a less-great record player. When you start diggin' those field hollers and Alpine yodels like I do, you'll know your sound system is better than good.

In my system, the EMT 912-HI arm and JSD 6 cartridge made every music genre seem like my latest favorite discovery, and that's exactly the trait I'm looking for when auditioning source components. During the course of these auditions, I played more records in six weeks than I'd played during the previous six months. I did that because I kept wanting more. That's my highest praise. ■

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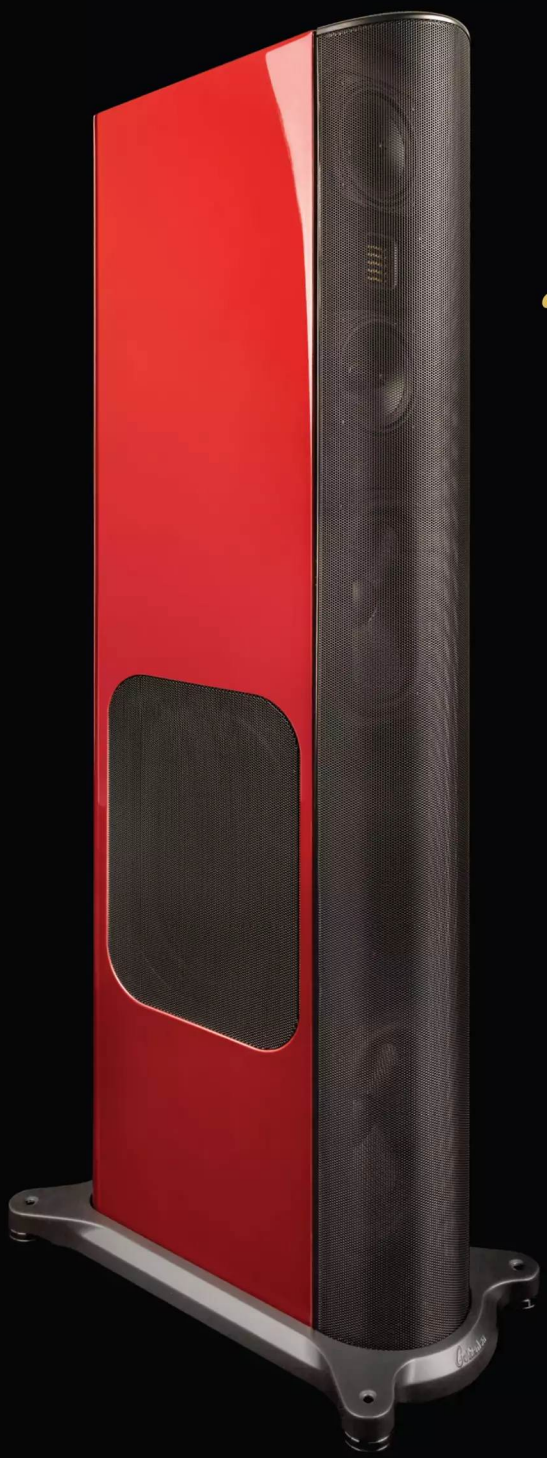

T66 and the author are from the US — but the speaker's performance and the comments about GoldenEar at the Munich High-End show are for all mankind:

"The big AudioQuest room with Rockport speakers was typically fantastic — AQ has a habit of putting their all into the entire system in their exhibit rooms so that you can hear everything that the cables are doing (or, more importantly, not doing).

But it was the smaller AudioQuest and GoldenEar room that really captured my attention thanks to a new and very slim pair of GoldenEar T66s."

– Marc Phillips, Part-Time Audiophile

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BY ALEX HALBERSTADT

THIS ISSUE: Could the "jazz kissa," or something like it, ever exist in the US?

A Clean, Good-Sounding Place

In a scene from *The Silence of the Lambs*—a film that for all of its camp happens to be nearly perfect—FBI cadet Clarice Starling asks caged psychopath Hannibal Lecter for help in figuring out a serial killer's motives. "Do we seek out things to covet?" Lecter responds, following Starling with his eyes as though she were his next meal. "No," he continues, "we begin by coveting what we see every day."

Lecter's astute observation applies equally well to audiophilia. Much of this hobby consists of coveting: before we own a component, we usually spend a long while imagining all the ways it will improve our lives.

And how do we begin to covet? In my case, my father's hi-fi introduced me to the practice of close listening. It was cobbled together from mostly Soviet-bloc gear, and the fact that it didn't sound particularly good was rather beside the point. What mattered was participating in his ritual of putting on a record, sitting down in front of the speakers, and sharing a contemplative experience. The illuminated altar created by his small stack of components still appears in my dreams.

While working at my first job, I was introduced to better sound by a colleague who became a lifelong friend. Boris listened to ProAc Future One floorstanders driven by the gaudy-looking but lovely sounding VAC Renaissance Thirty/Thirty power amplifier, with bits converted by a dCS Purcell DAC. Boris listened mostly to classical CDs, and his system played them with nearly electrostatic clarity and remarkable ease, despite the well-known pitfalls of early digital sound.

Because of these formative experiences, I knew early on that close listening at home using perfectionist gear was something people did—and something I was going to pursue. While working with Boris, I haunted hi-fi salons for deals on used gear that would eventually replace my very modest college system. A lifelong interest was sparked.

But what happens if none of your family or friends own a decent hi-fi? How do you even discover that this hobby exists? Especially if you grow up poor, as I did after coming to the United States, a great audio system can seem like something hidden away behind the locked, alarmed doors of affluent homes. There are still plenty of terrific audio retailers out there who recognize that exposing young listeners to good sound builds cultural value and makes business sense. Then again, I have vivid memories of salesmen working on commission being visibly reluctant to play a system for a young person without the obvious markers of having money. And I recall one New York hi-fi salon owner's wife following Black customers around the store without a trace of self-consciousness, a practice that understandably horrified the store's other employees.

But what if there were a place besides the home or hi-fi shop to encounter close listening and good sound? What if the experience could be available for the price of a drink? And what if the place where this happened turned out to look and feel really cool? As it happens, this idea first took root in Japan, where a network of listening cafes, or *kissa*, sprung up after the advent of electronic recording in the late 1920s and reached its full flowering after World War II.

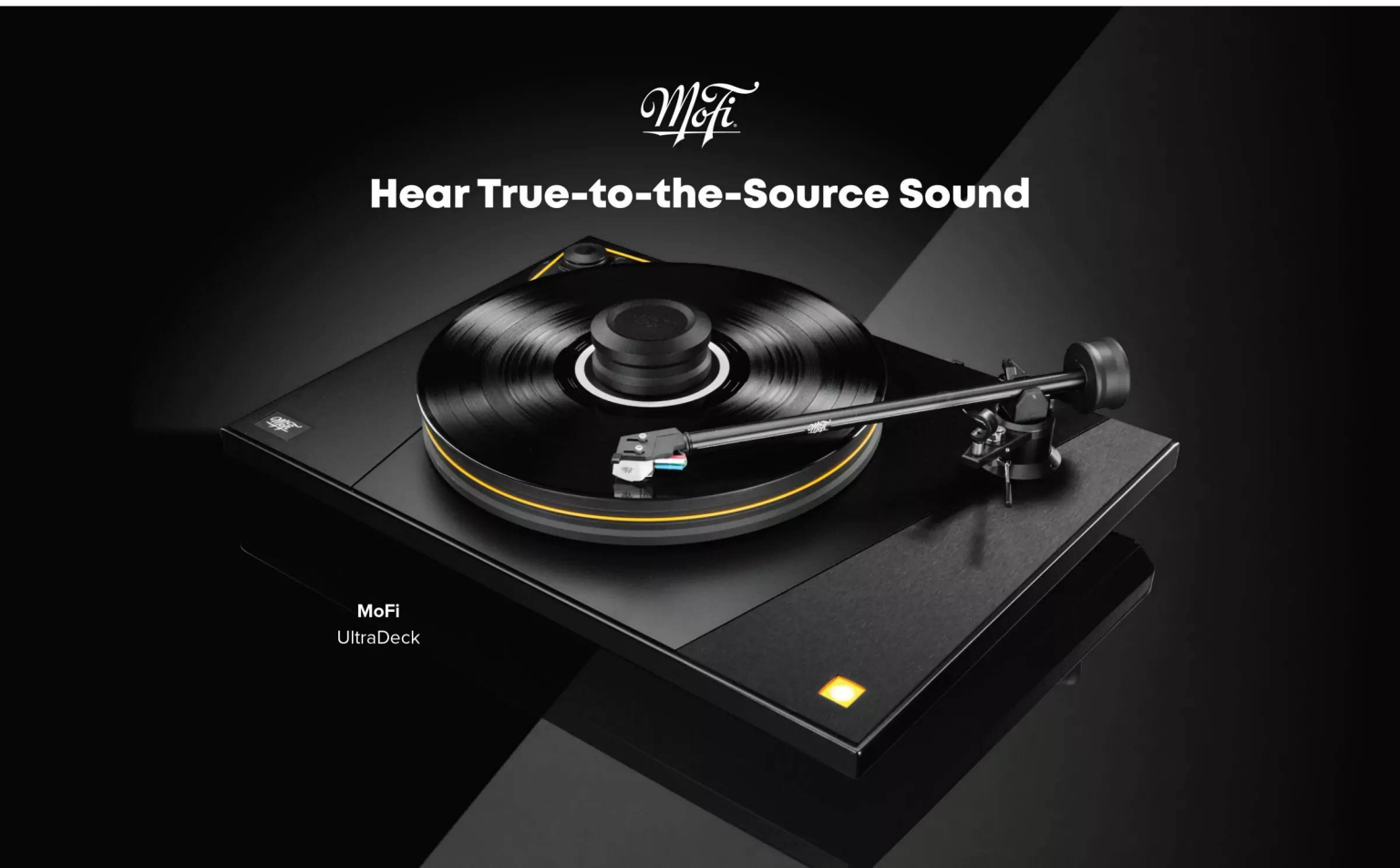
The function of the *kissa* was not to feature live music but to create a place where people listened seriously to recorded music and shared their connoisseurship. These cafes addressed the fact that foreign records were too scarce and expensive for many Japanese listeners—as was much of the better playback equipment. *Kissa* began to offer mostly jazz after the war, when French and American films with jazz soundtracks began to make their way to theaters, and especially after Art Blakey and the Jazz Messengers' vastly influential first Japanese tour in 1961. (Classical music listening cafes, called *meikyoku kissa*, proliferated as well, though in smaller numbers.) By the mid-1970s, there were roughly 500 jazz cafes in Japan, and many neighborhoods in Tokyo had a half-dozen *kissa* where fans could listen to new releases and fill gaps in their musical knowledge.

Most *kissa* proprietors played jazz records on high-quality systems while serving coffee and alcoholic drinks in dimly lit, atmospheric spaces to small groups of mostly regulars. If you haven't had the chance to visit one of these delightful places—hideaways with names like Flamingo, Lady Jane, and New Dug (which is featured in Haruki Murakami's novel *Norwegian Wood*)—imagine a dark-wood bar filled with old furniture, framed record covers, shelves of LPs that sometimes number in the thousands, and huge horn speakers from the likes of Altec Lansing and JBL. Many *kissa* occupy quiet side streets and are run by a proprietor known as a master, or *masutā* in Japanese. Traditionally, the master is a jazz expert and chooses the records with minimal input from the visitors, who are expected to remain quiet while the records are played. In the popular imagination, these cafes are not places for socializing but rather for the intellectual, aesthetic, and even spiritual pursuit of listening. The house rules posted at a Tokyo *kissa* called Jazz Position Ongakukan crystalize this notion: "Welcome. This is a powerful listening space. Please 'dig' your jazz. We ask that you observe silence while the music is playing."

I find the proposition of a public listening space downright exciting. Not only because it offers a chance to move beyond one's own record collection and taste but because of the prospect of cultural fellowship—of appreciating great music played back well in the company of others. Though much of this hobby is solitary, many of my favorite moments happen while listening with friends, discovering their favorite records, and being impressed and sometimes moved by their taste, acuity, and observations. You can probably relate. And of course there's the excitement of access to exotic gear—for many older Japanese, an afternoon at a *kissa* was their first exposure to reproduced sound good enough to sit down for.

My enthusiasm turns out to be hardly unique. While the number of *kissa* in Japan has been declining since the 1990s, over the past several years a new crop of listening bars have sprung up in the West, with notable examples opening not only in Los Angeles, London, and New York but also in less expected locales like Denver, Dublin, Barcelona, Miami, Oakland, Berlin, São Paulo, and Tel Aviv. For the first time in ages, people everywhere seem to care about sound quality in public spaces—a development driven in part by the increasing popularity of vinyl records—and about welcoming young people to these spaces. This strikes me as the most exciting thing to hit hi-fi in ages. The only question is how a Japanese-style *kissa* experience might adapt to the listening public in the West.

To find out, I dropped into a few listening spaces here in New York. Though I found more than a dozen restaurants and bars that cottoned to that description, some struck me as little more than eating and



drinking establishments with better-than-average sound systems. I narrowed the candidates down to places that 1) offered truly exceptional and intentionally designed hi-fis and 2) encouraged listening as the main activity.

My first stop was Public Records in the Gowanus section of Brooklyn, which has grown into a compound that includes a bar-restaurant, a record shop, a concert venue, and a lovely outdoor garden with a deejay booth. On a recent afternoon, I ate lunch in the cavernous dining room among well-dressed patrons who clearly understood the symbiotic relationship between attractive young people and ambitious spaces. My grilled cheese and green tea were pretty good, too.

Of more interest to me was the upstairs bar, described as a "lounge and listening space ... with bespoke cocktails and nightly selectors." During my visit there a few nights later, I spotted no selectors but did see a lovely looking and quite massive pair of speakers designed for the space by Devon Turnbull of OJAS. The enclosures resembled those of a 1950s Altec Voice of the Theatre. Turnbull told me that he built them with rare and sought-after components, like a pair of vintage Altec 288 compression drivers per side firing into

1803 sectional horns with double throats. Two cabinets, each containing an eye-popping 31.5" low-bass driver from Fostex, were built into the wall near the ceiling. A backlit alcove between the speakers displayed a Pioneer reel to reel, which provided the music. Around us, several couples sipped cocktails at tables in the large and blandly stylish room.

Two friends and I sat down at a table in

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front of the hi-fi, ordered a bottle of Grüner Veltliner, and listened. On the reel to reel was a recording of a deejay set someone had done at an earlier date: polite ambient and EDM tracks played back at a respectful volume. As the night wore on and more people arrived, the crowd noise began to compete with the music. People were talking and enjoying themselves, with no one seeming to pay much attention to the music, until the space began to sound not far different than any popular New York City bar.

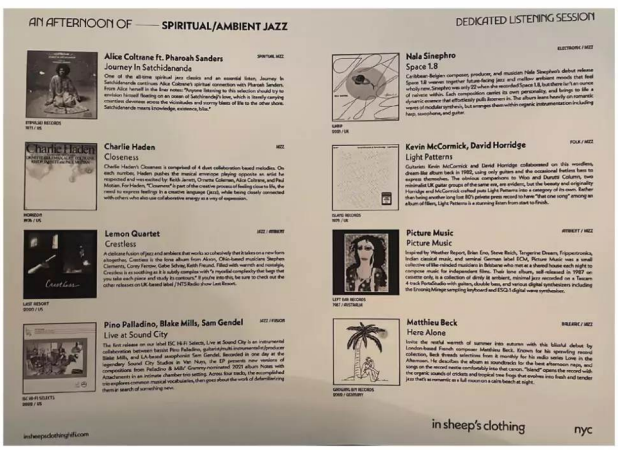
As visitors filed in and out, more than a few stopped in front of the highly coveted hi-fi and took selfies. It occurred to me that the sound system served as a totemic object that signified exclusivity and cool but was essentially providing background music for the socializing and revelry. This, I realized, was the main difference between a Japanese *kissa* and an American "listening space." Being quiet and respectful in public accords with the Japanese character. I've been to crowded restaurants in Kyoto that sounded as hushed as poetry readings. But most Westerners—particularly Americans—experience silence in a bar or restaurant as uncomfortable and even strange. As most New Yorkers will tell you, the city is full of eateries so loud that communicating across a table requires shouting.

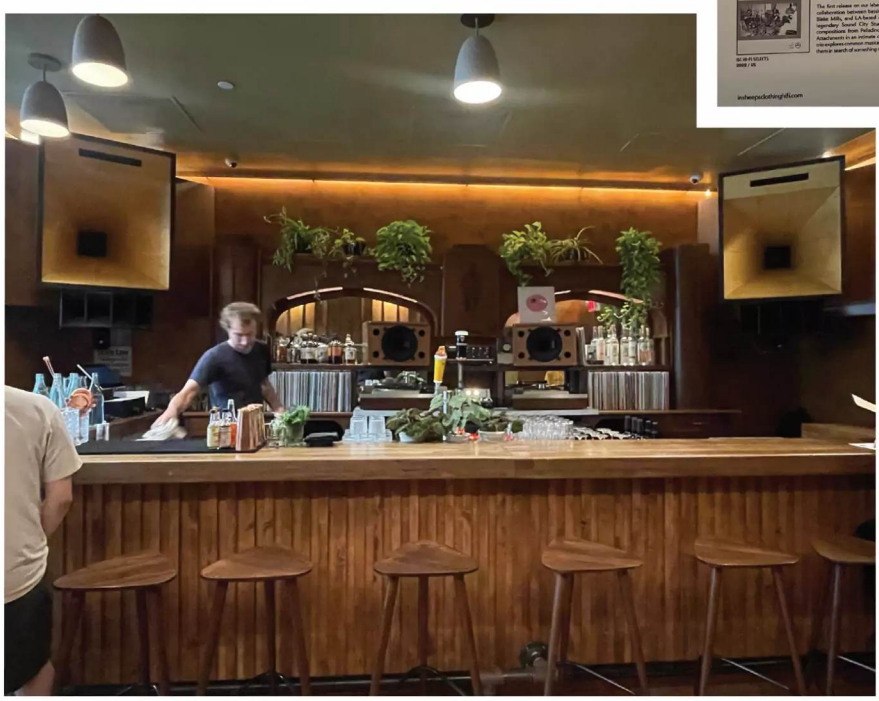
Turnbull told me that the "hardcore hi-fi system" he initially designed for the upstairs space at Public Records relied on purist, low-powered single-ended tube amps. "I conceptualized that system at the peak of COVID," he said. "This was a time when a lot of us were incorrectly optimistic about people's desire to listen in a bar. And it became immediately apparent that people wanted to party there. In the case of this system, the SET amps weren't powerful enough to drive the speakers above the crowd noise, and we couldn't trust most selectors not to push them into clipping territory. So we reverse engineered the hi-fi to get more headroom, and most of the time began using a more conventional pro amp, which worked much, much better."

Can anyone get a bar full of tipsy Americans to shut up? I considered this while visiting a restaurant in Manhattan's West Village called Port Sa'id, where some friends and I dined on genuinely superb Middle Eastern food in view of a pair of horn speakers so huge that they looked like they were designed for a castle or maybe a tech billionaire's post-apocalyptic underground bunker in New Zealand. I didn't hear these speakers, but down the hall I found my way to another impressive-looking hi-fi, this one inside a cozy bar. The space turned out to be the New York outpost of In Sheep's Clothing, which operates a terrific music and audio website and print magazine as well as a record store and event space in Los Angeles.

In Sheep's Clothing NYC turned out to be a far smaller space than the upstairs bar at Public Records, with more Japanese vibes. The hi-fi comprised a pair of Technics SP-10 direct-drive decks, a Luxman push-pull tube amp, a lovely custom-looking mixer-preamp, and two hefty horn speakers mounted above the bar and created by One A Way Sound Reproduction, an audio consultancy in Tel Aviv. Everything else was made of dark wood. There was a small rack of records available for sale. The wall facing the bar was outfitted with three stacked wooden pews reaching steplike to the ceiling that listeners could occupy like bleachers.

The space was crowded and downright rowdy. A singalong was happening at the bar. People were glued to their phones. A decidedly un-svelte young man—dressed in a homemade half-shirt, rubber boots, and a straw fedora—was making out with his girlfriend. Just another night at a downtown bar, except that when the bartender put on an LP—David Crosby's *If I Could Only*





My dream of an American *kissa* shimmered for the next hour and change, until three guys in Bermuda shorts rolled into the bar.

Remember My Name—I could tell even over the crowd noise, which did not subside, that the hi-fi kicked like a mule.

After doing a little digging, I learned that the people who run ISC's NYC outpost aren't quitters. Determined to produce a more authentic *kissa*-ish experience, they offer "dedicated listening hours" every Monday afternoon from 2–5. Now *this* sounded promising! I showed up the following Monday promptly at two to find the bar mostly empty and miraculously quiet. The bartender handed me a card that

listed the six records he'd be playing with informative and well-written descriptions, a kind of record menu for a session titled "Spiritual & Ambient Jazz." I ordered a mezcal cocktail and sat in the bleachers' middle row. Around me I spotted a young woman drawing on an electronic device, a couple on a date, and two young men whom I quickly recognized as fellow music and audio nerds.

The session's first record was one of my all-time favorites, Alice Coltrane's *Journey in Satchidananda*, played at a volume that made conversation difficult. Cecil McBee's bassline, which opens the title track, sounded taut but thunderous, as it should, Coltrane's harp was like sea spray against the rocks of the tanpura and bells, and the first notes of Pharoah Sanders's tenor made the breath catch in my throat. Here was a hi-fi that provided all the dynamics and snap of a large horn system with the euphony of tubes and the relentless pace of good direct-drive, a sound that remains difficult to experience in a typical New York City apartment.

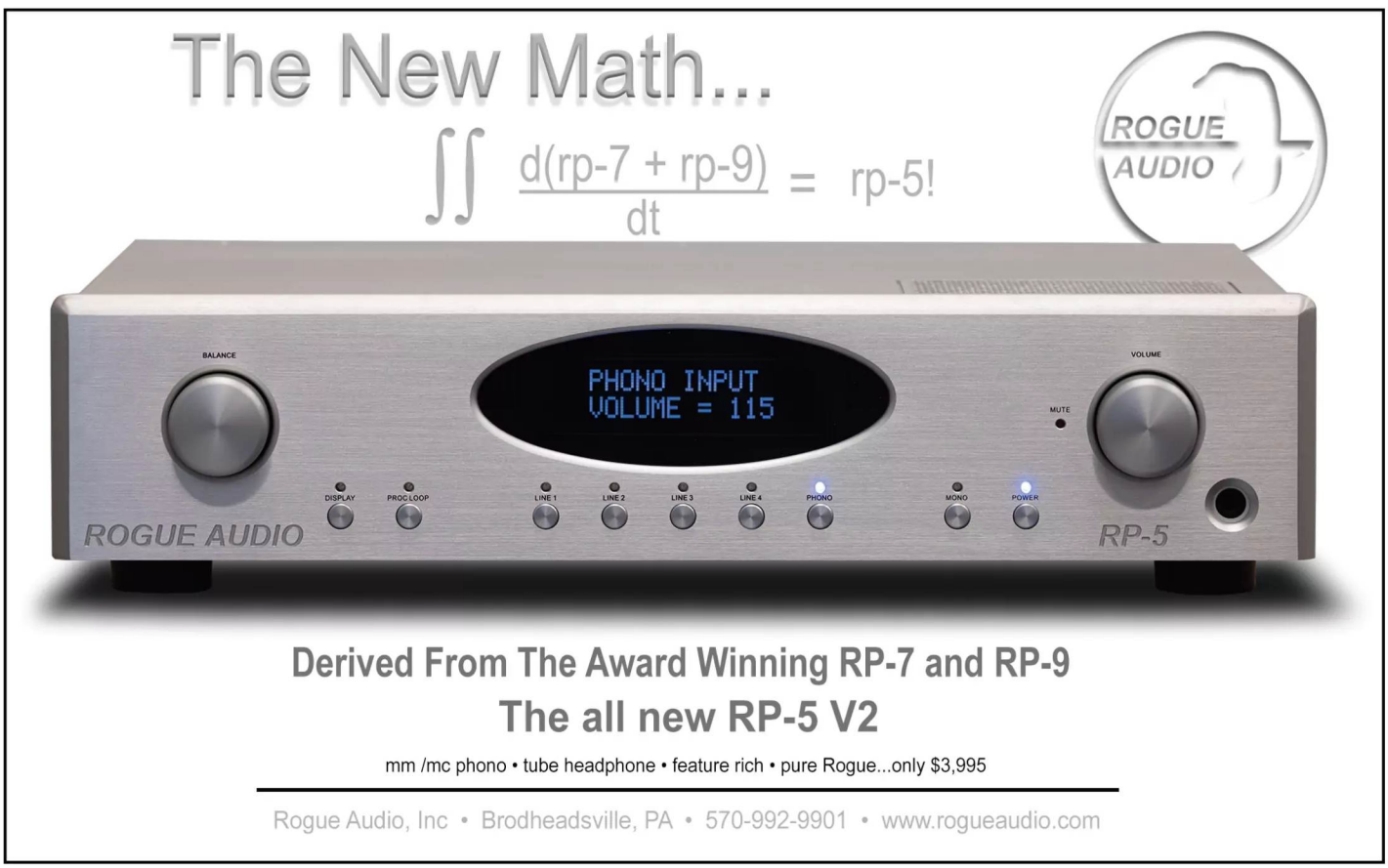
When I looked around, everyone was engrossed in the music. I took another sip of the cocktail and felt happy. For the next hour and change, I experienced what I'd always wanted to—listening to recorded music in a communal space dedicated to that very thing, surrounded by great records and sound, appreciative strangers who seemed as excited as I was, and excellent drinks.

My dream of an American *kissa* shimmered for the next hour and change, until three guys in Bermuda shorts rolled into the bar. They were deep in the kind of braying, self-congratulatory conversation one hears often wherever financial-services brethren gather, and I could tell that neither the loud music nor the room of rapt listeners were going to get in their way. Their confab continued for the remainder of the listening session, and our dirty looks bounced off of them like acorns off of the roof of a station wagon.

Our reverie was in shambles, and rather than slipping into a private world of Jean-Claude Van Damme fantasies, I decided to chat with the bartender. A musician and mixologist memorably named Forrest Hackenbrock, he told me that he'd worked at several listening spaces, including a short-lived one operated by In Sheep's Clothing in Los Angeles. After bitching for a spell, I asked whether the management had considered encouraging or even enforcing silence in the Japanese manner, at least during the dedicated listening hours. "We tried posting rules and asking people to be quiet, but the response was pretty negative," he told me. "So now we play the records and hope for the best."

The conversation made me wonder whether this new crop of listening spaces will continue growing, and if so, what experience they will eventually settle on offering. I also posed the question to Devon Turnbull, who has more experience installing lofty hi-fi systems in public spaces than anyone I'm aware of. "I have no reason to believe that Westerners are interested in the Japanese listening-bar experience," he told me. "I've spoken to a lot of the other people in the US and Europe who have tried building these kinds of bars, and there's been a learning curve that everyone has been going through. But for the first time in a long time, people care about having good sound in commercial spaces. We will come out of this with something good, but it won't be the same as what people were originally emulating in Japan."

May it be so. If you live near one of these spaces, I encourage you to go experience it, preferably with friends. You may find yourself liking hi-fi listening away from home, and this intrepid social experiment deserves your support. And you may see or hear something you will begin to covet. But for the love of god, just keep it down! ■



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SPIN DOCTOR

BY MICHAEL TREI

THIS ISSUE: A new Planar 3 on Rega's 50th anniversary.

A new P3 on Rega's 50th

When I think about landmark years in the history of British hi-fi, 1973 sticks out. Three companies got their start in the first half of that year that went on to become cornerstones of the British audio scene: Linn Products, Naim Audio, and Rega Research. That means they're all celebrating their 50th anniversaries in 2023.

The parallels among the three companies don't end with their British origins and founding year. Each was started by someone born in the immediate aftermath of World War II. The late Julian Vereker of Naim, eldest of the three by a few months, was born on the very day that Germany surrendered to the Allies to end the war in Europe. Do the math, and you'll find that all three founders were 27 years old, give or take a month, when they set up their respective companies. I guess that must be the right age for starting a successful hi-fi manufacturing business.

There was already a thriving British audio industry long before 1973. Great companies like Quad, Tannoy, Leak, Garrard, Wharfedale, and (as I will discuss a bit later) Collaro paved the way. British hi-fi was big business, but it really shifted into a higher gear in the 1970s as British baby boomers schemed to move up from their parents' music systems, typically a standalone mono record player like a Dansette or Pye Black Box, to a more substantial component stereo system.

As you might expect now that it's 2023, all three companies have introduced a product to celebrate a half-century in business, and it's interesting to compare what each has brought to the table. Naim introduced the NAIT 50, a modernized, limited edition of their popular NAIT integrated amplifier from 1983, which retains the throwback style Naim fanboys like to call Chrome Bumper. The NAIT 50 looks nearly identical to its predecessor, but at $3599, it's about three times the inflation-adjusted price of the 1983 amp. Despite that, a production run of just 1973 (get it?) units means that they're likely to sell out quickly.

Linn decided to shoot for the stars with the Sondek LP12-50, which is essentially an upgraded version of their prior flagship, the Sondek LP12 Klimax, with a few special touches sprinkled on. A new plinth made from a compressed beech material that Linn is calling Bedrok promises to deliver improved performance. The styling has been given a subtle makeover by no less a figure than Sir Jony Ive, the design guru behind many iconic Apple products.

The catch is that the LP12-50 comes with an eye-watering $60,000 price tag, essentially double that of the standard LP12 Klimax reviewed by Herb Reichert last year.[1] Despite the cost, I expect Linn to have no trouble finding enough deep-pocketed Linn and Jony Ive fans to sell out the limited run of 250 LP12-50s.

Rega Planar 3 50th Anniversary Edition

The second turntable I ever owned was a Rega Planar 3. As a college student with limited funds, I was cutting my teeth as an audiophile under the heavy influence of the late 1970s British audio press. They said that if I couldn't quite swing the price of an LP12, my next-best bet was a Rega Planar 3 for about a quarter of the cost. Back then, Regas were hard to get in the UK and some dealers had long waiting lists, but here in the US they were easier to find. My Planar 3 came with the original S-shaped, silver R200 tonearm, and it got me through a period when I was consuming a vast amount of music in my tiny 7' × 12' college dorm room. I was on a fast and furious upgrading path, and within a year I made the next planned step prescribed by those British magazines: I got myself an LP12. But my memories of my Planar 3 remained fond and strong. So a few years back when I saw an original early

1 See stereophile.com/content/linn-klimax-lp12-record-playing-system.

Planar 3 just like mine for sale, I snapped it up just for nostalgia's sake.

While it's not quite the first product Rega made, I think of the Planar 3 as the company's core product. Launched in 1976, the Planar 3 was Rega's third turntable, but it's not quite as simple as 1, 2, 3. The original Rega turntable was called the Planet—I own one of those. Instead of using a standard flat platter, the Planet supported the record on three round pods that rotated around a central hub like planets around the Sun. This was followed by the original Planar, which replaced the pod platter with a more conventional flat aluminum one. The real breakthrough came about a year later when Rega co-founder Roy Gandy was introduced to a way of making highly precise platters using float glass.[2] This led to the development of the Planar 2 and Planar 3 turntables, and it remains a defining feature of most Rega turntable designs to this day.

For the next 20 years, the Planar 3 went through a series of incremental upgrades, most notably the introduction of the RB300 tonearm for the Planar 3 in 1983 (see below) and the slightly simpler RB250 for the Planar 2 a year later. Rega shortened Planar 3 to P3 in 2000. Since then, each significant upgrade of the Planar 3 has been accompanied by a name change, first to the P3 (2000), the P3-24 (2007; lower-noise, 24V AC motor + laminate plinth), then the RP3 (2012; RB301 tonearm, lighter, stiffer plinth), the Planar 3 (2016; new plinth, bearing, and RB330 tonearm).

It wasn't until 1995 that Rega finally expanded its two-model turntable lineup by adding the upscale Planar 9, paving the way for future assaults on the high end that were simultaneously in line with Gandy's iconoclastic thinking. Today, Rega's lineup includes between eight and 12 models, depending on which variations you include in the count.

Roy Gandy has always been a sideways thinker when it comes to turntable design. He believes that most audiophile turntable designs focus on the wrong things. Since day one, Rega's turntables have remained steadfastly focused on a few key principles. Gandy describes a turntable as a vibration-measuring machine, and if you want to measure tiny vibrations accurately, there needs to be absolute rigidity between the measuring tool and the item being measured, in this case, the stylus tip and the record groove. One step towards this goal was the introduction of the game-changing RB300 tonearm. By using a one-piece, pressure-cast aluminum armtube, which

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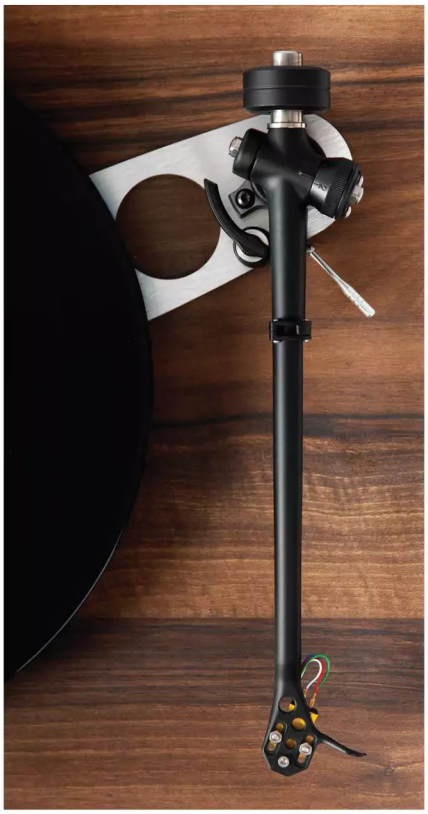
forms both the headshell and the bearing housing, Rega was able to eliminate the joints and couplings found in most arms and their inherent flex points. The arm bolted directly to the turntable plinth to get rid of the flexing introduced by using an arm collar with height adjustment. Later, Rega would add a rigid brace on both sides of the plinth between the arm base and the bearing to render this coupling even more rigid.

This obsession with rigidity resulted in an arm that was a breakthrough at the time for high performance at a reasonable price but which also lacked some of the adjustments used to fine-tune cartridge setup such as azimuth and arm height. Gandy believes that the increased rigidity achieved by not including these features results in far more meaningful performance advantages than adjusting azimuth or VTA, so every Rega arm, including the flagship RB3000, is built this way.

Another key design principle for Rega is minimizing the mass of the turntable's plinth. As you move up in the Rega line, the turntables get progressively lighter. Gandy sees mass damping as a wrong turn, finding that the heavier something is, the longer it will resonate, at a lower frequency, while with lightweight construction



any resonances will die off quickly. Add rigidity and those resonances, before they die off, will be high in frequency where they do less harm. With models from the Planar 8 up, Rega's plinths use high-tech, lightweight materials and laminated foam core construction of increasing sophistication, including a cutaway, skeletal design that I like to call the pretzel plinth, that reduces the amount of material to the bare minimum required to maintain that critical structural rigidity. The platters, too, progress, from the flat glass used on the Planar 2 and 3 to the stepped, multilayer glass used for the Planar 6 and 8, which get thicker toward the periphery of the platter to maximize inertia without adding mass.

Rega has not said that the 50th Anniversary Planar 3 will be limited to a certain number of units, only that production will cease at the end of 2023. Given what's on offer, I expect demand is strong. For $1695, you get a fully loaded Planar 3 in a special "walnut effect" finish with a 50th Anniversary model badge and a retro-style tinted dust cover. The package also includes the Neo PSU MK2 power supply (an option on other P3s), the Exact (Rega's best moving magnet cartridge), the aluminum

2 See en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Float_glass.

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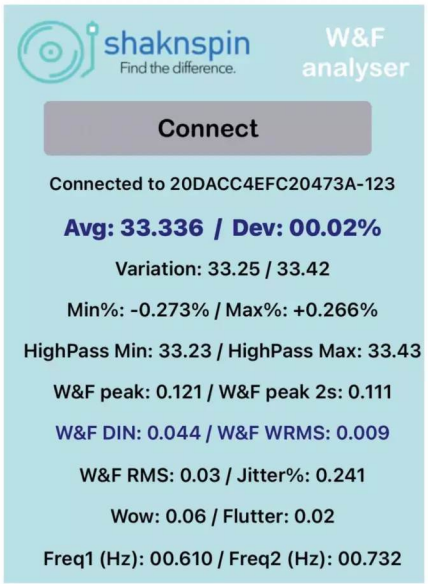
motor-drive pulley from the Planar 6, and the Reference EBLT drive-belt upgrade. Normally, a standard Planar 3 with the Exact cartridge and none of those other features sells for $1595, so with the 50th Anniversary package you're getting the power supply upgrade, the pulley upgrade, the belt upgrade, and the special finish for just $100 more.

Setup

Because the 50th Anniversary Planar 3 is shipped as a complete package, the setup process is very simple. The three feet are not height adjustable, so you need to ensure that your shelf is already level or use something to prop up the feet as required. I find old CDs useful for this task, but drink coasters will do in a pinch. The cartridge comes pre-installed, and because the Exact uses Rega's proprietary three-point mounting, its position is fixed in Rega's preferred alignment. The RB330 tonearm uses a spring to apply the tracking force, so to install and position the counterweight, you set the down force dial to zero, balance the arm by adjusting the counterweight position, then turn the dial to the required tracking force (1.75gm for the Exact). I found that even with the antiskating slider set to zero, there was still some sideways pull, which can make balancing the arm a little tricky. I found it easier to turn the downforce dial to 1.75 then use my Riverstone Audio stylus force gauge to adjust the counterweight position to get that downforce. The final setup tasks are to connect the Neo MK2 power supply to the back of the turntable and the signal cables to your phono preamp. As with all Rega tonearms, the tonearm is grounded to the outer conductor of the cable, so there is no fiddly, separate ground wire to connect to your preamp.[3]

Rega has been accused of making their turntables run a little fast to get that toe-tappy, pacey sound. With the speed-adjustable Neo MK2 power supply, this isn't an issue. The 50th Anniversary Planar 3 arrives pre-adjusted at the factory to run perfectly on speed with your specific turntable. Still, the first thing I checked was the Planar 3's running speed. It was bang-on perfect, and according to the Shaknspin2 speed analyzer, subsidiary specifications were also excellent.

At its core, this latest Planar 3 is nearly identical to the one HR wrote about in 2017,[4] but the upgrades have ironed out most of the niggles Herb encountered. My main interest was to compare it to my 43-year-old Planar 3 to see how much more performance Rega has managed to wring out of the old girl over those decades.



I didn't have a second Exact cartridge to mount in my original Planar 3, so I used an Audio Note IQ III, a moving magnet cartridge made for Audio Note by Goldring. The IQ III is a superb performer that sells for about twice the cost of the Exact. The two systems will sound different, but the cartridge shouldn't be a performance bottleneck. I also gave the old Rega a full service, replacing the drive and the motor suspension belts and cleaning and lubricating the main bearing, following Rega's detailed instructions to the letter, using two drops of the specified 80-weight gear oil.

Thinking back to records that were in heavy rotation when I had my original Planar 3, I put on Elvis Costello's album *Trust* (F Beat XXLP 11 UK pressing) and was instantly transported to dorm room 711 in Syracuse University's Booth Hall, circa 1981. By the time I started side 2 and the song "New Lace Sleeves," the memories were flooding back via little details I listened for back then: the way the reverb behind EC's voice keeps shifting throughout the song, moving you from a close-up, intimate perspective to a wider, more open space towards the end of each verse. Drum-

3 In case you might be planning to someday substitute a low-output moving coil cartridge: This also means that the RB330 and other Rega tonearms are incompatible with current-mode phono preamps.

4 See stereophile.com/content/gramophone-dreams-14-rega-planar-3. Also see Sam Tellig's 1984 review of the original Planar 3 and Michael Fremer's follow-up from 1996. You can find both at stereophile.com/turntables/184rega/index.html.

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mer Pete Thomas's staccato figures were noteworthy, as was the way he changes to straight 4/4 beat to propel the song along as the verses progress.

Switching over to the 50th Anniversary Planar 3, it was instantly clear that there really has been a lot of progress since then. Just about every element of the sound has been improved, from the way Steve Nieve's organ sounded more in tune to how Bruce Thomas's plucked bass line has more meat around each note. EC's voice has always been tough to reproduce, especially his sibilant sounds, which on the wrong system can sound harsh and distorted. Some earlier Rega moving magnet cartridges can do exactly that, but with the Exact on the new Planar 3, the perspective was as clear as a freshly washed window, as smooth as a James Bond pickup line. The new Planar just sounds better sorted and like a coherent whole, providing a clearer perspective on the music making. This turntable has a real knack for allowing you to forget about audiophile affectations like imaging and soundstaging so you can just kick back and enjoy your records.

THE COLLARO CLOTH TURNTABLE MAT

In prior columns, I have described how fans of the Linn Sondek turntable can be a pretty fickle bunch. Should you propose any type of modification to factory doctrine, you'd better be sure it delivers the goods if you want to avoid the Linnie scorn. Not every modification, though, is rejected by loyalists; the Collaro Precision Cloth Turntable Mat has been getting quite a lot of approving buzz from the Linn crew, so I figured I should check it out.

Founded more than 100 years ago to manufacture spring motors for windup gramophones, by the 1960s, Collaro had become Britain's largest manufacturer of record changers, outpacing even Garrard. Nothing lasts forever, however, and after a series of mergers and acquisitions, Collaro ended up being owned by Philips, which shut the company down in 1974.

Fast-forward about 44 years. The Collaro brand was revived in 2018 by two audio enthusiasts, Chris Bentley and Colin Dent, to produce hi-fi accessories. Their first product, the Collaro Precision Cloth Turntable Mat, is aimed squarely at Linn LP12 users, and apart from its deep red color and bold Collaro logo, at first glance it seems similar to the Linn original. Closer examination shows that the Collaro has a significantly denser weave, which Dent described as 100% wool cloth that has been finished through a process called fulling, which preshrinks the material and provides a smooth, feltlike surface.

The Collaro is available through a handful of mostly Linn retailers here in the US or directly from the company in the UK. While the direct price for the red version is £99, there is no US distributor, so the price charged by US-based dealers may vary. A black version is also available, for £120, which Dent says offers identical performance; it costs a bit more due to lower sales volume. Collaro also makes a thicker mat in white called The Tempest, which Dent says is optimized for idler drive turntables,

The Linn LP12 is the Porsche 911 of the audio world in that over decades of production, almost every single part has been upgraded several times. Almost. One part that hasn't changed is its felt platter mat. I should say that they haven't changed much, or significantly. I have noticed that the latest Linn mats seem somewhat thinner than the mats made 40 years ago, but maybe I'm just imagining that. Compared to a recent-production Linn mat, the Collaro is slightly thinner still and, by my measurement, leaves the record surface about half a millimeter lower.

No doubt there's now someone in the back with their hand up desperate to point out that this tiny change in height will affect the stylus rake angle, which is true, but do the trig and you'll find that with a 9" tonearm, the difference is about 7.5 minutes of a degree; in other words, small enough to safely ignore.[5]

I tried the Collaro mat on a mid-1980s LP12 with a Hercules power supply, Linn Ittok tonearm, and Lyra Delos moving coil cartridge. This proved to be one of the easiest comparisons ever, because all I had to do was take a few seconds to swap the mats back and forth and listen. While anyone who says the Collaro makes a massive difference is probably lying, or lacks a sense of proportion, I was able to hear small, repeatable improvements especially in bass definition and power, while the midrange became more focused and slightly less forward. Changes like this are most noticeable when you switch back to the original mat after spending some time with the upgrade. All of the changes I noticed were improvements. At £99, for an LP12 owner this seems like a no-brainer. ■

5 In case it's been a long time since you took trig, that's about an eighth of a degree.

CONTACTS

Rega Research
Southend-on-Sea, Essex SS2 5TE, UK.
Web: rega.co.uk.

US distributor:
The Sound Organisation,
1009 Oakmead Dr.,
Arlington, TX 76011.
Tel: (972) 234-0182.
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Collaro Audio
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ROGIER VAN BAKEL

Focal Maestro Utopia Evo

LOUDSPEAKER

How do you know you're beyond help as a card-carrying audiophile? For me, it happened during a recent trip to Italy. Several times a day, my thoughts drifted to the Focal Maestro Utopia Evo speakers that had been delivered two days before I left for Europe. At one point, I considered FaceTiming the housesitter to request a live view of the listening room, where the Maestros were playing music, breaking in.

Chrissakes! Couldn't I just enjoy *la dolce vita*? Savor the belly-busting meals in Treviso and Civitavecchia, surrender to Tuscany's soul-soothing landscapes, thrill to Rome's old-world charms? Ninety-nine percent of the time, I *did*. The trip was a delight, and I wouldn't have missed it. But yes, I thought of those Maestros several times a day. The heart wants what the heart wants.

Drama on my doorstep

Having heard them at four audio shows over the span of a year, I'd been in justifiably high spirits the day the French speakers made it to my doorstep. They rocketed to the top of my must-review list because, each time, they'd impressed me with their power and finesse.[1]

There's a second reason I won't soon forget the French speakers arriving *chez moi*: They were accompanied by an unexpected palletful of Naim electronics whose value represented a few years' income. Had I won an audio lottery? Was someone trying to get in my good graces? *Mais non!* It was a shipping-company error. When I called Focal America, an employee took care of the issue, seemingly grateful that I hadn't helped myself to a fat five-finger discount. A freight truck arrived a few hours later and hauled the treasure away. I didn't know whether to feel relief or regret.

To get the Maestros inside—they weigh 256lb each and maybe 350lb in their crates—I enlisted the aid of a local contractor and a sinewy worker from his

1 On the last day of AXPONA 2023, Editor Jim Austin, who knew of my fondness for the speakers, texted me: "Heard the Maestros. Damn." I texted back, "Right?" More loquacious assessments weren't needed. Until now.

PHOTOS BY L'ATELIER SYLVAIN MADELON

SPECIFICATIONS

Description Three-way bass-reflex loudspeaker with two 11" woofers, one 6.5" Power Flower midrange driver with NIC motor, and one inverted-beryllium-dome tweeter. Frequency response: 25–40kHz, ±3dB; 21Hz, –3dB. Crossover frequencies: 280Hz and 2.2kHz. Sensitivity: 93dB/2.83V/m. Impedance: 8 ohms nominal, 3.1 ohms minimum. Recommended power: 50–600W.
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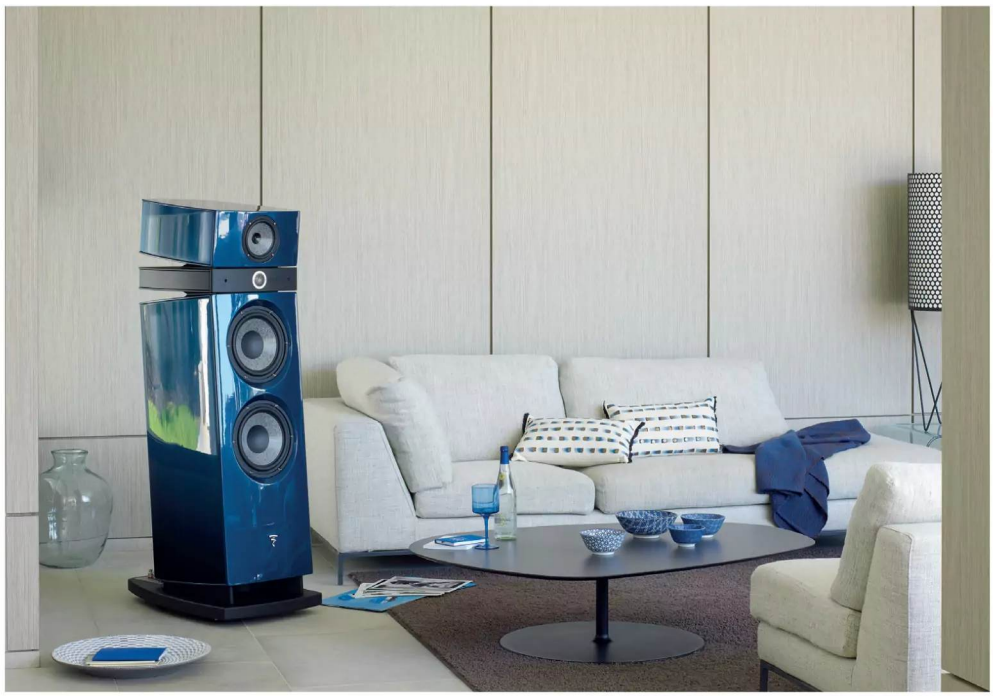
North American distributor: Focal Naim America, 313 Rue Marion, Repentigny, Quebec, QC J5Z 4W8, Canada. Tel: (800) 663-9352. Web: focalnaimamerica.com.

crew. Using a dolly and ratchet straps, the three of us jostled and jerked, heaved and hoisted. Then we unpacked the speakers and maneuvered them into position. It helped that Focal's floorstanding Utopias are equipped with low-profile casters,[2] so you can *roll* them—just not easily across a thick rug. We managed. Maneuvering and uncrating the speakers and storing the crates in the gear closet was a one-hour-plus, three-person job.

When I informed my friend Lindsey about the Maestros' laborious delivery, he texted back, perplexed, "Good lord, man. I envisioned you audiophile reviewers sitting in a perfectly tuned, oxygen-rich control room at exactly one bar of pressure, swirling a glass of wine while a crew of roadies move and adjust every variable according to the micro-expressions on your otherwise smug faces." A man can dream.



After the helpers left, I inspected the speakers up close. Their two-tone cream-and-walnut finish shone. It was hard to believe that this exact pair had been used as demo speakers at multiple audio shows: There wasn't a scratch on the rotund, vaguely droidlike enclosures.

Like my reference speakers, Focal's Scala Utopia EVO ($52,000/pair), the Maestro Evo ($76,000/pair, one level up in the Utopia line[3]) rise from a matte-black MDF plinth. That base curves toward the rear and protrudes about 6" from the back of the tower, forming a plateau on which dual binding posts are horizontally mounted. Behind the binding posts is a trio of large, bridge-shaped jumpers marked "Sub-bass," "Midrange," and "Tweeter." These let

2 Once the factory spikes are installed, the casters no longer make contact with the floor.

3 There are two Utopia Evo models above the Maestros: the Stella ($149,998/pair) and the Grande ($279,998/pair).

MEASUREMENTS

When I learned that Rogier van Bakel was reviewing Focal's Maestro Utopia Evo, I flashed back to the logistical difficulties I experienced when I reviewed an earlier version of this loudspeaker, the Maestro Utopia III, in July 2010.[1] The Evo is the same size—almost 5' high—and weight—256lb—as the earlier speaker. It made sense, therefore, to drive my test gear the 500 miles to RvB's place in Maine rather than struggle with the loudspeaker's bulk at my Brooklyn home.

For the measurements, I drove one of the Focal Maestro Utopia Evos, serial number A1BPEF00543, with RvB's Krell FPB 200c. I used DRA Labs' MLSSA system with a calibrated DPA 4006 microphone to measure the speaker's behavior in the farfield and an Earthworks QTC-40 mike for the nearfield responses. It wasn't possible to raise the Maestro Utopia Evo off the floor for the measurements, so the first reflection from the ground occurs earlier than is usually the case with my measurements. I therefore measured the response and dispersion with the microphone at 1m rather than my usual 50". RvB and I moved one of the speakers away from the sidewall so that it fired along his listening room's diagonal, but it wasn't possible to measure the off-axis response more than 45° to each side of the tweeter axis.

Stereophile Monitor Audio Silver 500 Impedance (ohms) & Phase (deg) vs Frequency (Hz)

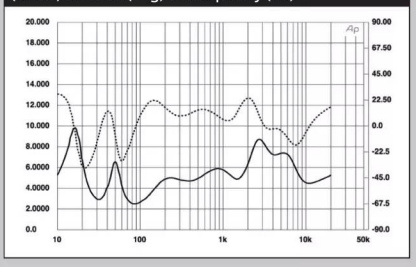


Fig.1 Focal Maestro Utopia Evo, jumpers set to Neutral, electrical impedance (solid) and phase (dashed) (2 ohms/vertical div.).

Focal specifies the Maestro Utopia Evo's sensitivity as a high 93dB/2.83V/m. My B-weighted estimate was very similar, at 92.7dB(B)/2.83V/m. The Utopia Evo's nominal impedance is specified as 8 ohms. I measured the speaker's impedance parameters with Dayton Audio's DATS V2

1 See stereophile.com/floorloudspeakers/focal_maestro_utopia_iii_loudspeaker/index.html.

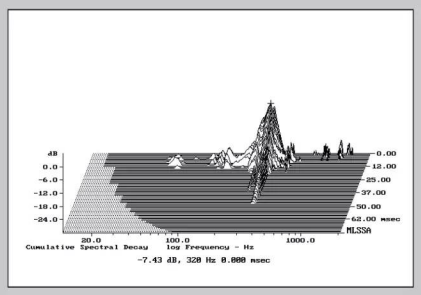


Fig.2 Focal Maestro Utopia Evo, cumulative spectral-decay plot calculated from output of accelerometer fastened to rear of midrange enclosure (measurement bandwidth, 2kHz).

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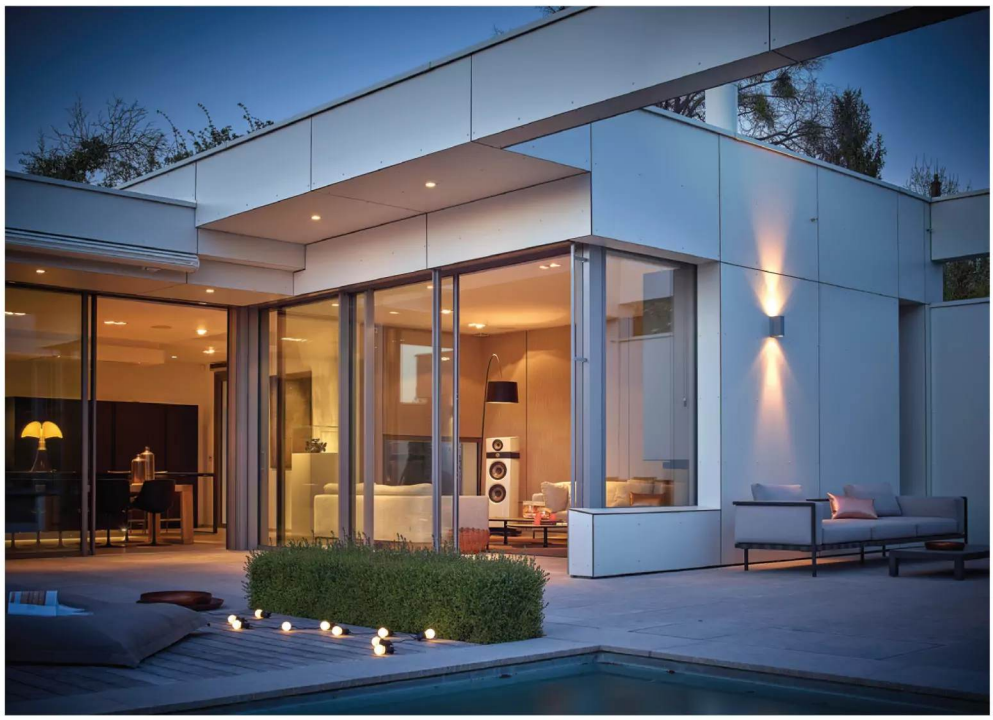
you tune the Maestros to taste. Each jumper has three positions. The center one provides the most technically neutral response. The rightmost bus boosts the attendant frequencies by about 1dB for the bass and treble, about half that for the midrange jumper. The left bus cuts them by the same amount.

In 2010, John Atkinson gave the Maestro Utopia III his highest recommendation.[4] Its successor, the Maestro Evo, is the same size and shape. Its accordionlike silhouette is made up of three separate subenclosures. Visually, the compartment with the bass drivers floats above both the plinth and the 2"-tall, front-facing flared vent that works in conjunction with the 6" down-firing bass port behind it. The low-frequency cabinet leans a few degrees away from the listener. Constructed from a proprietary MDF recipe the company claims is "much more rigid than classic MDF," the housing accommodates two of Focal's 11" woofers, which are made in France (as are all the company's transducers). Both drivers reproduce sub-280Hz frequencies. The bottom one, which is animated by a fat double-ferrite magnet, is responsible for the deepest bass, though the crossover doesn't distinguish between them.



Above the bass box sits a solid-black aluminum enclosure,

4 See shorturl.at/ahsP2.

measurements, continued

system. The speaker's impedance magnitude (fig.1, solid trace) remains between 4 and 8 ohms throughout the midrange and treble. The minimum value is 2.5 ohms at 83Hz. This measurement was taken with the three jumpers set to their central, Neutral position. With the jumpers set to High, the port-tuning frequency didn't change, but the impedance peak in the low bass rose to 14.5 ohms. The minimum value with this setting was 2.3 ohms. With the jumpers set to Low, the minimum value rose slightly to 2.6 ohms and the low-frequency peak dropped by almost 2 ohms. The electrical phase angle (fig.1, dotted trace) is occasionally high, especially at low frequencies. The equivalent peak dissipation resistance, or EPDR,[2] lies below 3 ohms between 19.5Hz and 42Hz and between 53Hz and 221Hz and below 2 ohms in several regions in the bass. The minimum EPDR values are 1.52 ohms at 26Hz, 1.48 ohms at 72Hz, and 1.675 ohms at 121Hz. The Maestro Utopia Evo is a demanding load for the partnering amplifier, though this will be ameliorated by the high sensitivity.

The three enclosures seemed inert when I rapped them with my knuckles. The woofer enclosure was impressively silent. The only significant resonant modes I found with a plastic-tape accelerometer were on the midrange enclosure's top and side panels, at 320Hz and 344Hz (fig.2). However, these are of relatively high Q (Quality Factor) and the affected areas are small, both of which will work against there being audible consequences.

The saddle centered on 32Hz in the Maestro Utopia Evo's impedance-magnitude plot suggests that this is the tuning

2 EPDR is the resistive load that gives rise to the same peak dissipation in an amplifier's output devices as the loudspeaker. See "Audio Power Amplifiers for Loudspeaker Loads," *JAES*, Vol.42 No.9, September 1994, and stereophile.com/reference/707heavy/index.html.

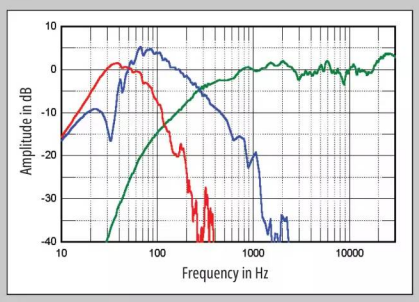


Fig.3 Focal Maestro Utopia Evo, jumpers set to Neutral, acoustic crossover on tweeter axis at 1m, corrected for microphone response, with the nearfield midrange (green), woofer (blue), and port (red) responses plotted below 355Hz, 355Hz, and 400Hz.

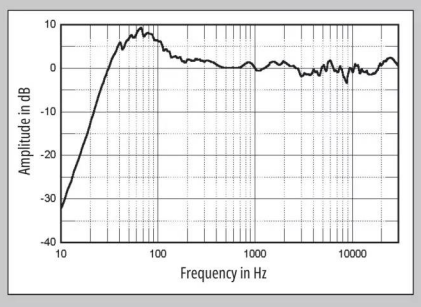


Fig.4 Focal Maestro Utopia Evo, jumpers set to Neutral, anechoic response on tweeter axis at 1m, averaged across 30° horizontal window and corrected for microphone response, with the complex sum of the nearfield responses plotted below 300Hz.

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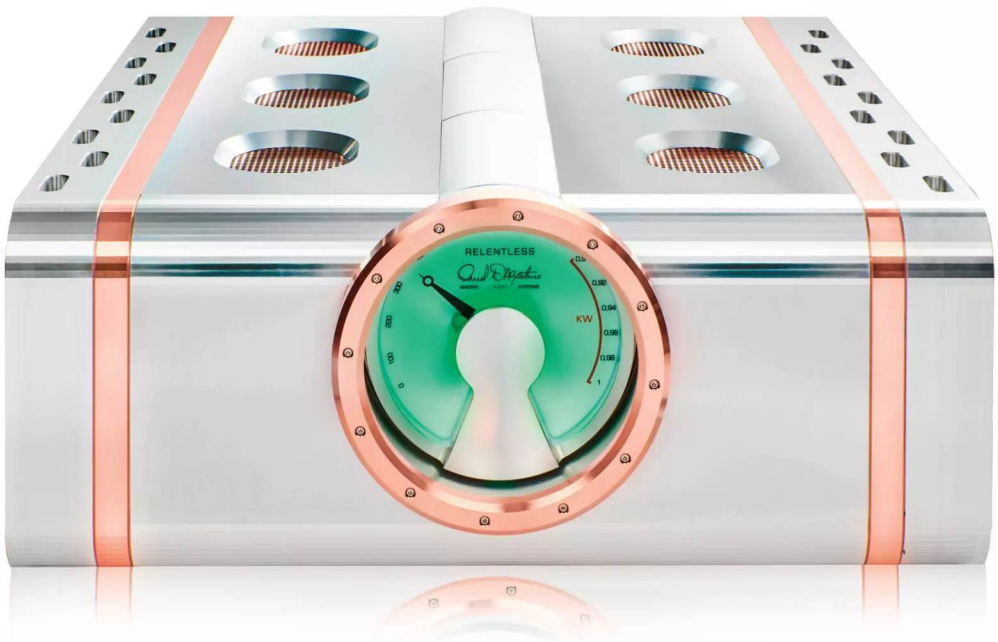

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positioned parallel to the floor, that's roughly the size and shape of an extra-thick pizza box. This chamber houses the pure-beryllium inverted-dome tweeter, which handles all frequencies above 2.2kHz.

Rejean Bedel, Focal's product manager in France, explained to me in an email that 10 years of research and development went into the current Utopia line. "We wanted to refresh all the technological aspects of the loudspeaker—drivers, membrane, internal mechanical structure, etc.—without changing the [exterior] design. More high-tech tools have enabled us to go further in understanding, characterizing, and optimizing loudspeaker and cabinet behavior. These tools come from the automotive and aerospace industries—things like CAD, finite-element simulation, laser scanning, additive manufacturing,[5] and airflow simulation." Focal also built a larger anechoic chamber to aid the Utopia makeover.

One result of all that research is the midrange transducer, an updated version of Focal's highest-end 6.5" "Power Flower" driver, which is mounted in the Maestro's third, topmost subenclosure.

5 More often called 3D printing.

measurements, continued

frequency of the downward-firing port on the woofer bin's base. The port's nearfield response (fig.3, red trace) features a broad peak between 20Hz and 90Hz, which implies extended low frequencies. The two woofers behaved identically; their summed nearfield response (fig.3, blue trace) had the expected reflex notch at 32Hz and peaked between 50Hz and 150Hz. The woofers' upper-frequency output rolls off sharply, crossing over to the midrange unit's output (green trace) at the specified 280Hz. The farfield response of the midrange unit and tweeter on the tweeter axis (green trace above 355Hz), with the jumpers set to Neutral, is even, with small, narrow suckouts balanced by equally small peaks.

The black trace above 300Hz in fig.4 shows the Focal's farfield output averaged across a 30° horizontal window centered on the tweeter axis, again with the jumpers set to Neutral. The balance is respectably even throughout the midrange and treble. With the low-frequency jumper set to Neutral, the complex sum of the nearfield midrange, woofer, and port responses (fig.4, black trace below 300Hz) has a large peak between 30Hz and 150Hz. This boost will be due in part to the nearfield measurement technique, which assumes that the drive units are placed on a true infinite baffle, ie, one which extends to infinity in both vertical and horizontal planes. But this low-frequency behavior, which I could hear with the pseudorandom MLSSA signal, does suggest that the Maestro Utopia Evo's reflex alignment is underdamped.

The Maestro Utopia Evo's horizontal dispersion (fig.5) is well-controlled, with the tweeter's top-octave output gently rolling off more than 15° off-axis to the sides. In

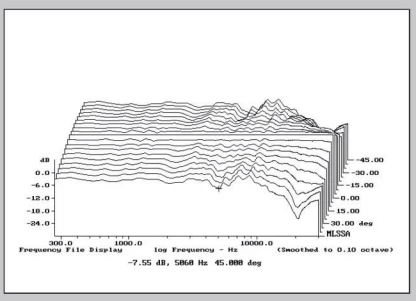

Fig.5 Focal Maestro Utopia Evo, lateral response family at 1m, normalized to response on tweeter axis, from back to front: differences in response 45°–5° off axis, reference response, differences in response 5°–45° off axis.

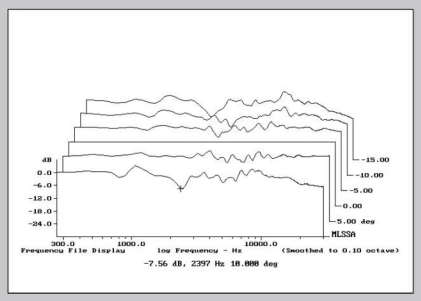

Fig.6 Focal Maestro Utopia Evo, vertical response family at 1m, normalized to response on tweeter axis, from back to front: differences in response 15°–5° above axis, reference response, differences in response 5°–10° below axis.

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- Dean Cacioppo, *Tracking Angle*, June, 2023

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That driver is crowned with a Faraday ring.[6] "The ring's dimensions, materials, and positioning were optimized to make the magnetic field no longer affected by the position of the voice-coil, by the amperage, or the frequency of the current passing through it," according to Bedel.

By the way, this midrange compartment, which takes up the top 8" of the 4' 10"–tall speakers, bends forward. The tilt is a welcome hindrance to audiophiles who would otherwise use their speakers to support *Star Wars* figurines or houseplants. You know who you are.

Break-in and setup

While I was in *bella Italia* for eight days, the speakers were fed a looped playlist of test tracks to help limber up the drivers. After I returned, whenever I wasn't in the room for stretches of time I played the Tellurium Q burn-in files,[7] full of digital percussive punches and frequency sweeps.

Two weeks later, I had to concede that if any changes had occurred since I'd first fired the Maestros up, they were so small that I couldn't discern them. By comparison, the Maestros' smaller siblings, my Scala EVOs, were initially bass-shy. They'd taken about six weeks to unleash the kind of low-end muscle I craved. A British friend of mine, also a Scala owner, insists that with his pair, the bass was underwhelming for more than six *months*. Then, one day, joy. Suddenly, "We're talking about the difference between 'where's the bass?' and 'we're on the bass train to bassland in a bass universe of bass,'" he texted me in a state of elation. With the Maestros I'd received, there were no issues. Maybe this was because of all the hours they'd racked up during those audio-show demos. Their low end was forceful and prodigious from the day they arrived.

The Focals sounded best positioned farther apart than most speakers in my 15' × 21' room—7' 9" center to center. This gave me the most coherent, focused, and massive soundstage.

Once I'd determined the optimal placement, it was time to install the optional isoAcoustics Gaia feet Focal had sent along. In the spring, I had attended an A-B demo[8] of the Gaias on Focal speakers and come away impressed. But in my room, paired with the Maestros, I couldn't get the Gaias to produce the same magic. It was hard to put my finger on, but the upper midrange and treble region seemed less engaging with the Gaias. Perhaps it's because the Gaias raise the speakers by roughly 3", and even without them the Maestros' tweeters are 7" above the level of my ears. Could that be key to what I was hearing? All I know for sure is that I got the most pleasing results with Focal's factory spikes combined with a cheap tweak: I tipped the speakers slightly forward by placing foam yoga blocks (cut in half lengthwise) under the rear spikes.[9]

Success! Well, mostly. Despite the two dozen acoustic panels in my listening space, including tall bass traps in the corners, I struggled with a room mode at about 35Hz. Previous speakers hadn't seemed to excite it much, but the Maestros did, presumably because they simply put out much more energy in that frequency range than those other speakers did. I sculpted some of the problem away with Roon's parametric EQ, but I wasn't satisfied until I dealt with the peak using proper room correction software: ARC Genesis via my Anthem STR integrated amplifier.

Later, I connected a Krell FPB 200c power amp while still feeding the signal through the Anthem's ARC circuitry. The Krell, bless its steely soul, gave me a tight and thunderous bottom end. I also

6 Developed 200 years ago, Michael Faraday's induction ring—the world's first electric transformer—remains both useful and improvable. See shorturl.at/fiE45.

7 See telluriumq.com/system-disc.

8 See shorturl.at/yFKW2.

9 The Maestro owner's manual includes an IKEA-like diagram illustrating the optimal listening configuration, with the listener's ear at or slightly above tweeter height. According to Rogier's measurements, on just their spikes—no Gaias—the Maestro tweeters are 47" from the floor. When Rogier is sitting in his listening chair, which is of pretty ordinary height, his ears are 7" *below* the tweeter axis with the Maestros level. In an email correspondence, Focal's Bedel wrote that it's okay to listen below the tweeter axis. JA's measurements confirmed this, finding that a suckout develops but not until 10° below below the tweeter axis. In most configurations, the listener's ears should remain well above the region where the suckout occurs especially with the speakers tilted forward by raising the rear spikes. Bedel further clarified: "It's not recommended to tilt the Maestros with other things than the spikes. A speaker that isn't perfectly stable can be dangerous. We know that a tweeter at 115cm is almost the maximum height, but it's still good for a standard chair or sofa. We decided on 115cm to get a nice sense of envelopment and overhang."—**Jim Austin**

measurements, continued

the vertical plane (fig.6), the tweeter-axis balance is maintained 5° above and below that axis, which is useful considering that the tweeter is 47" from the floor. A suckout at 2.4kHz, close to the upper crossover frequency, appears 10° below the tweeter axis.

In the time domain, the Maestro Utopia Evo's step response on the tweeter axis (fig.7) indicates that the tweeter and midrange unit are both connected in negative acoustic polarity, the woofers in positive polarity. The tweeter's output arrives first at the microphone, followed by that of the midrange unit, then that of the woofers. The decay of each unit's step blends smoothly with the start of that of the next lower in frequency, which implies optimal crossover implementation. The Focal's cumulative spectral-decay (waterfall) plot (fig.8) was affected by the early reflection from the floor in front of the speaker, which meant I had to window the impulse response more aggressively than usual when I calculated this graph. The initial decay is impressively clean in the region covered by the tweeter, but some low-level hash is present at the top of the midrange unit's passband.

The Focal Maestro Utopia Evo's measured performance offers a full-range output coupled with wide dispersion and a neutrally balanced midrange and treble. Overall, it measured very similarly to the Utopia III, though with more of an underdamped low-frequency alignment, which will not be optimal if the speaker is used in small rooms or positioned too close to the room's boundaries.—**John Atkinson**

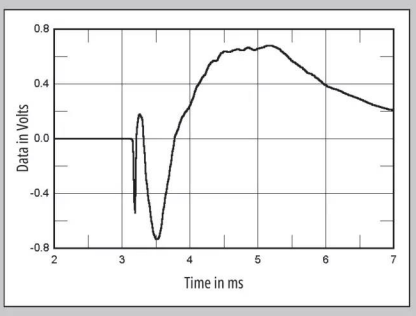

Fig.7 Focal Maestro Utopia Evo, step response on tweeter axis at 1m (5ms time window, 30kHz bandwidth).

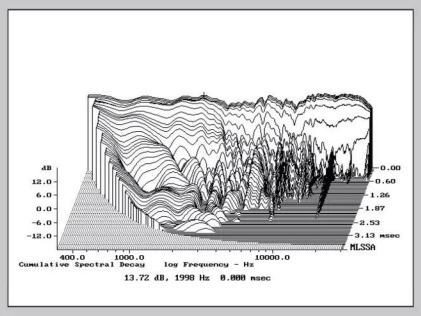

Fig.8 Focal Maestro Utopia Evo, cumulative spectral-decay plot on tweeter axis at 1m (0.15ms risetime).

auditioned the Maestros with Margules U-280 SC 30th Anniversary Limited Edition amplifiers, configured as monoblocks and equipped with factory KT88 and 12AU7 tubes; that duo excels in harmonic coherence and 3D imaging. I got the best of both worlds when I biamped the Focals, letting the Krell take control of the bass while the Margules amps handled the midrange and treble.

Maestro, musique!

Through the Maestro Evos, the bass on Metropolis's "Planners and Thinkers" (16/44.1 FLAC, Soundtrack Classics/Tidal) slammed so deep and turned so seismic, it was almost scary. My room is built on a concrete slab with rubber subflooring, but damned if my chair didn't shake. I'd accidentally clicked the "loop track" button in Roon and was powerless against the repeats. The sound was so satisfying that I let the recording play four, five times in a row.

I also got bruising bass on "Prism" by British trip-hop outfit Submotion Orchestra (16/44.1 FLAC, SMO/Qobuz). The listening experience was almost tactile. The Maestros' super-beefy low end and their unapologetic boisterousness might be a little too much for some listeners. In food terms, this speaker is the 16oz ribeye (saturated fat and all), not the lean 10oz sirloin. Me, I'm a ribeye man. Sometimes I even put the "SUB BASS LEVEL" jumper on the back of the speakers in the rightmost position for a little extra bass.

Next up was "Slang" (16/44.1 FLAC, A440/Tidal), a Jaco Pastorius composition played by Brian Bromberg on both fretted and fretless basses. Though all multitracked parts play in more or less the same register, nothing sounded jumbled or crowded. It was easy to follow each bass line, even as they wrapped around each other.

The album I've played more than any other this year is Charles Mingus's *The Black Saint and the Sinner Lady* (24/96 FLAC, Impulse!/Qobuz). By turns lyrical and frenetic, the album turned 60 years old this summer. It deserves some commemoration—plus a few awed relistens—for the offbeat arrangements alone. The tortured bassist and his band paint with rich brass textures and trippy, furious colors. Muted horns sound like they're singing, wailing, protesting, mourning. There's an obvious debt in the orchestration to Duke Ellington's *Anatomy of a Murder*, but Mingus is much brasher than the older man, taking improvisation to the brink of anarchy before pulling his musicians back into the fold of the written score. Add some flamenco-guitar passages, a lush classical-piano part, and a flurry of surprising chord changes and rhythm shifts, and there it is: an affecting musical triumph, undiminished by age.

If you need convincing that the Maestros can do more than punch hard and low, the Mingus masterpiece is exhibit A. Those textures I mentioned came through with astonishing control and liveliness.

Some fault metal-dome tweeters, including beryllium-dome tweeters, for sounding sharp and penetrating. Not in my book. When John Atkinson wrote his review of the Maestro Evos' predecessors (also equipped with beryllium-dome HF drivers), he found that the speakers were "a touch mellow in the top octave." That's true with the Evos as well. The Maestros give you what's there, excelling in detail, but the tweeter range isn't goosed in pursuit of faux high-frequency resolution.

And the difference with my Scalas? The numbers are close: The Scala goes down to 27Hz flat (24Hz at −6dB), the Maestro to 25Hz (21Hz at −6dB). Sensitivity, form factor, and materials are practically the same. Yet the Maestro exhibits considerably more low-frequency slam, more bigness. That second 11" woofer matters. Focal's Bedel says that the Maestro isn't just an incremental improvement on the Scala. First, he notes that while the specified bandwidth may

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be similar, Focal added a second bass driver and then applied the company's magnetic damping system to the woofers, which will alter the character of the bass. Also, although the Scala and Maestro woofers look the same, they're different in specs and build. Specifically, the Maestro's LF drivers have "ultrapowerful double ferrite magnets and 50mm voice coils," Bedel points out.

Because I'd read the frequency specs before I heard the Maestro Evos in my room, I was ready to write a vaguely annoyed riff about how all floorstanders that cost more than a nicely appointed E-class Mercedes ought to be truly full-range and how the Maestros just can't get all the way down to 20Hz. Consider that plan canceled. These speakers are immensely satisfying, basswise and otherwise. Subjectively, they somehow perform better in the lowest octave than several full-range speakers I've had in my home, including Tekton Moab and Paradigm Founders Series 120H, both of which I loved.

Tipping the scale

In his 2021 review[10] of Magico's M2, Jim Austin wrote something that stuck with me: "Some big speakers turn pianos into battleships. I admit that this can be a pleasant experience, but it's not realistic; plus, it's unnerving to encounter a 15' soprano." He added, "some big speakers ... make all music sound big."

Well, that's the Maestros, to an extent. They do small and intimate just fine, delectably even—but sometimes, they scale things up. No, they never conjured 15' Brünnhildes, but Paquito D'Rivera's solo clarinet at the beginning of "Afro," from the terrific *Habanera* (16/44.1 FLAC, Enja/Tidal), did sound larger than life in my room. Michael Hedges's acoustic guitar on the Zappa composition "Sofa No. 1," off *Oracle* (16/44.1 FLAC, Windham Hill/Qobuz), was a touch inflated, too.

I am torn. Is there some exaggeration in how the Maestros present small instruments and solo vocals? Often, yes. Is it engaging and thrilling all the same? Also yes. Moving the speakers closer together addressed my gripe to some extent, rendering instruments smaller, but the soundstage got smaller, too, and I sensed a bit less of the majesty that I find so appealing in the Maestros.

Clearly this issue is highly recording-dependent; it depends on how the microphones were placed and how the music was mixed. On one of the most arresting songs from David Bowie's vast catalog, "Bring Me the Disco King," from *Reality* (16/44.1 MQA, ISO/Qobuz), a grand piano and a minimalist, cymbal-less drum kit are drawn with proper proportions—and the Thin White Duke has the voice of a vulnerable man, not a giant. These lines have taken on new meaning since his death seven years ago:

Don't let me know when you're opening the door.
Close me in the dark, let me disappear.
Soon there'll be nothing left of me,
Nothing left to release.

Though Bowie recorded the song at age 56, 13 years before he died, his vocals sound tired, but beautiful in the way of old leather or a fallen autumn leaf. The almost eight-minute-long lamentation is shot through with ache and regret. It's no swan song, but it would have fit seamlessly on his final two albums, *The Next Day* and *Blackstar*, on which his life force had begun to wane—though not his capacity for beauty.

The frailty of "Disco King" and its maker is underlined by a couple of small errors. Bowie hits a wrong note in the second line of verse two. Pianist Mike Garson, in his most memorable performance since 1973's hyper-lyrical "Lady Grinning Soul" (off *Aladdin Sane*), gets creative with the timing and dynamics of his phrases and finally comes in simply too late with a chord around 3:10.

It doesn't matter, or maybe it helps. The imperfections reveal the humanity of the players, perhaps even the infirmity of the human condition—a sweet fit with the song's theme. I suppose the recording wouldn't have been half as effective if drummer Matt Chamberlain had played scrupulously to a clicktrack, or if producer Tony Visconti had quantized Garson's piano part.

To me, other than vocals, it's often pianos and brass instruments that provide the test of truth when judging the performance of an audio rig. Happily, the Maestros gave no reason for complaint. On "Concerto for Two Pianos," a Bryce Dessner composition performed by Katia and Marielle Labèque (24/96 FLAC, Decca/Qobuz), the percussive and tonal qualities of the grand-piano strings were corporeal, full of energy, verve, and solidity. And I was floored by how beautifully the speakers rendered both Stefan Schulz's bass trombone and Tomoko Sawano's Steinway on *Berlin Recital* (16/44.1 FLAC, BIS/Tidal): meaty, with great transient bite and second-to-none layering. Via the Maestros, the lovely, medium-length decay of the notes easily revealed that the recording was made in the smaller of the Berlin Philharmonic's two concert spaces.

Beauty and brawn

One moment, the Maestros take on the character of a 200lb street brawler, the next, that of a ballerina. They did the only thing that matters in the wild world of hi-fi: connect me to the music. I produced pages of notes full of terms like authority, grace, ebullience, grandeur, brawn. But maybe this says it better than reams of descriptors: During the evaluation of almost every new piece in my system, I make a fresh Roon playlist of songs that show off the product particularly well. On average, I end up with a list of 30, 40 songs. After two months with the Maestros, I was up to 157 tracks. From chamber quartets to EDM, orchestral showpieces to Appalachian folk, delta blues to big band, these exceptional French speakers brought the joy. Astute and revealing, they're among the *haut*est of *haut-parleurs*. ■

10 See shorturl.at/nzHI2.

ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT

Digital sources 15" MacBook Air M2 running Roon 2.0. Lenovo ThinkCentre laptop running Roon ROCK. Auralic Vega. Naim Uniti Atom controlled with iPad Pro and iPhone 14 Pro Max. HiFi Rose RS520.
Preamplifiers Benchmark HPA4, Margules SF-220.
Power amplifiers Krell FPB 200c (recapped). Margules U280 SC 30th Anniversary monoblocks, Balanced Audio Technology REX 500.
Integrated amplifier Anthem STR.
Loudspeakers Tekton Moab. Focal Scala Utopia EVO.
Cables Full loom of Clarus Crimson. AudioQuest and Kimber Kable for biwiring.
Accessories Core Power Technologies Equi-Core 1800 MkII and Deep-Core 1800 power conditioners. Townshend Seismic Isolation Podiums for power amplifiers.
Listening room Custom-built 21′ × 15′ space with 10′ walls and gabled ceiling sloping to 16′, volume about 4000ft³. Double-thick drywall over Rockwool and mass-loaded vinyl. Hardwood floor over plywood, rubber, and a concrete slab. 12′ × 15′ wool rug on a thick felt pad. Acoustic treatments include four bass traps, two skyline diffusers, and a dozen wall- and ceiling-mounted absorption panels. Dedicated powerline and two 20A outlets.
—Rogier van Bakel

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SASHA MATSON

McIntosh C12000

PREAMPLIFIER

As I was talking with an audio-retailer friend recently, he reached for a Rolls-Royce metaphor to describe the McIntosh brand. Expensive? Sure, but not as expensive as some boutique high-end products. Fast? Sure, but there are faster things—also bigger things, smaller things, wackier things, and cheaper things.

But when you look at a Rolls or a Bentley, you immediately recognize it for what it is, and you want to sit down in it. And so it is with McIntosh, except you don't want to sit down in it; you want to sit down in front of it, between the speakers of the hi-fi system it occupies.

History matters. When a new model from Bentley appears, there is a connection to what came before it, a long tradition. There is no pretense of reinventing wheels; instead, it's about rolling those wheels a little farther on down the road. That heritage results in a comforting familiarity. From the first audio products McIntosh offered, in 1949, down to the present lineup, any knowledgeable consumer can look at it and immediately know what it's for and recognize its value. In particular, people value a legacy of quality, especially when so many older, vintage products are out there and still working. It feels good knowing that the thing you're buying is likely to last and be enjoyable and satisfying to use for a long time.

The C12000 is McIntosh's current flagship preamplifier. It's part

SPECIFICATIONS

Description Two-channel stereo, hybrid (tubed and solid state), dual-chassis analog preamplifier with phono stage. Vacuum tube complement: six 12AX7A, four 12AT7. Line inputs: six balanced (XLR), four unbalanced (RCA). Phono inputs: two (RCA). Outputs: two balanced (one solid state, one tubed, XLR), one unbalanced fixed, one unbalanced variable (RCA), one headphone (1/4", selectable impedance). Input impedance: 50k ohms balanced, 25k ohms unbalanced. Maximum output voltage: 20V RMS balanced, 10V RMS unbalanced. Frequency response: 20Hz–20kHz, +0, –0.5dB; 10Hz–100kHz, +0, –3dB. THD: 0.005% line, 0.05% phono. S/N ratio: 107dB line inputs, 83dB moving magnet phono input, 79dB moving coil phono input. Output gain: 15dB line, 40–64dB phono. Supplied accessories: remote control, module umbilical connectors.
Dimensions Both modules: 17.5" (445mm) × 6" (152mm) × 18" (457mm). Weight: 27lb, 25lb.
Finish Black
Serial numbers of units reviewed Preamplifier chassis, AKE1551; control chassis, AKD1646. Designed and manufactured in USA.
Price $16,000. Approximate number of dealers: More than 200. Warranty: Three years, nontransferable.
Manufacturer
McIntosh Laboratory, Inc.,
2 Chambers St.,
Binghamton, NY 13903.
Tel: (607)723-3512.
Web: mcintoshlabs.com.

1 Measured at 5mV input, 47.5k ohm loading, 40dB gain. MC specifications were measured at 0.5mV input, 1k ohm loading, 64dB gain.

of McIntosh's Hybrid Drive series of products that combine tubes and transistors in interesting ways. The first McIntosh product to incorporate such a mix—although it preceded the marketing term by several years—was the MA252 stereo integrated amplifier, released in 2017. It was "hybrid" in the familiar sense, pairing a tubed preamplifier stage with a 100W solid state amplifier. The range has since expanded to include amplifiers, preamps—even a CD/SACD player.

Currently, McIntosh offers eight preamplifiers, but only the C12000 is Hybrid Drive. This prime-cut, all-analog, dual-chassis model, with separate boxes for the power controller unit and the signal-path circuitry, continues a line started with the solid state

MEASUREMENTS

I measured the McIntosh C12000 with the preamplifier chassis sitting on top of the controller/power supply, the two joined with the supplied umbilical cables. I used my Audio Precision SYS2722 system[1] for the measurements, confirming some of the results with the higher-performance APx500. The C12000 has five independent outputs: one balanced pair labeled "T" for tube output circuitry; another balanced pair labeled "SS" for solid state output circuitry; an unbalanced pair labeled "Main" that can be switched between tube and solid state output circuitry; a second unbalanced pair labeled "Rec/Fixed" for sending output to a recording device; and a 1/4" headphone jack. I performed a complete set of line-input tests from the two sets of balanced outputs and from the Main output in both modes, then repeated some of the tests using the headphone output.

The Controller's firmware was V 1.02. All the outputs preserved absolute polarity (ie, were noninverting) with both balanced and unbalanced line inputs. As used by SM for his review, the input Gain Trim control was set to "0.0dB." In this condition, the maximum gain was 15.1dB from the balanced line inputs to both balanced outputs, 21dB from the unbalanced inputs to the balanced outputs, and 14.8dB from the unbalanced inputs to the unbalanced Main output in either mode. Setting the volume control to "60%" on the front-panel meters reduced the gain by 20dB.

The headphone output's source impedance was <1 ohm across the audioband, and its maximum gain depended on the setting. Set to "16–40 ohms," the gain was 9.14dB; to "40–150" it was 15.1dB, and to "150–600" it was 21.1dB.

The C12000's unbalanced input impedance was lower than the specified 25k ohms, but still usefully high at 13.8k ohms at 20Hz and 1kHz, and 12.8k ohms at 20kHz. The balanced input impedance was close to the specified 50k ohms, at 48.6k ohms at 20Hz and 1kHz, and 46.8k ohms at 20kHz. The output impedance is specified as 200 ohms, balanced, and 100 ohms, unbalanced. My estimates agreed with the specified impedances at 1kHz and 20kHz, in both SS and T modes, but the output impedance rose to 795 ohms, balanced, and 315 ohms, unbalanced, at 20Hz. As long as

1 See stereophile.com/content/measurements-maps-precision.

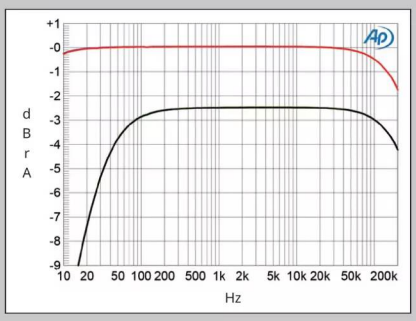

Fig.1 McIntosh C12000, balanced Solid State output, frequency response with volume control set to "100%" at 1V into: 100k ohms (left channel blue, right red), 600 ohms (left green, right gray) (1dB/vertical div.).

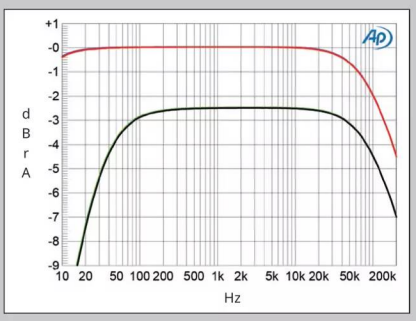

Fig.2 McIntosh C12000, balanced Tube output, frequency response with volume control set to "100%" at 1V into: 100k ohms (left channel blue, right red), 600 ohms (left green, right gray) (1dB/vertical div.).

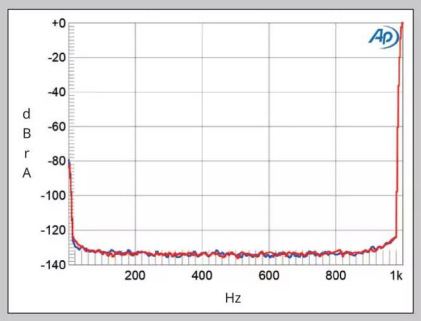

Fig.3 McIntosh C12000, balanced Tube output, spectrum of 1kHz sinewave, DC–1kHz, at 2V into 100k ohms with volume control set to "100%" (left channel blue, right red) (linear frequency scale).

The art of precision engineering

As a passionate music lover, Ole Klifoth was a regular visitor to venues and concerts all over Copenhagen. Yet he found himself unable to recreate the same electrifying sense of soul, emotion and atmosphere on his stereo at home.

Unable to find a speaker that truly captured the purity he believed a speaker should deliver, Ole could have simply shrugged, accepted the situation, and compromised his love for sound. But that was never going to happen. Ole decided to bring the live concert experience to the living room and in doing so, he created Audiovector.

"I took a student loan, and by trial and error and never knowing when to stop, I created the first Audiovector speaker on my kitchen table. For me, hearing a great speaker is the same as seeing a superlative piece of art. You just know when it's perfect."

Ole Klifoth, Founder of Audiovector

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3 CRUCIAL PARTS IN AN AUDIOVECTOR SPEAKER

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Air Motion Transformer (AMT) tweeters. Delivering a wider, deeper, higher and more natural soundstage that highlights advanced detail.

Tilted Plinth. A built-in steel spring decouples the speakers from the floor for a more articulate and exact sound.

C100, McIntosh's first two-chassis preamp, which was introduced in 1997. The C100 was followed eight years later by the C1000, a hybrid device: You could choose either the solid state chassis (C1000P) or the tubed chassis (C1000T), or you could get both preamp chassis and the C1000C controller for $26,000.[1] The C1000 was succeeded in 2015 by the C1100, but, though also a dual-chassis preamp, the C1100 was all-tube.

The C12000, which is now McIntosh's flagship stereo preamp, returns to the C1000's hybrid approach, but now both sets of electronics, tubed and solid state, occupy a single chassis—two chassis altogether including the controller. With the C12000, the price for a flagship McIntosh dual-mode preamplifier has fallen by a lot, to $16,000.

Separation of powers

The first thing to note about the two-box C12000 (after noting that there are two boxes) is that although they are freestanding, the two chassis must be joined by a pair of 3'-long cables terminating in proprietary 23-conductor connectors. Three feet isn't long, so the two preamp boxes need to sit side by side or perhaps vertically with suitable separation; McIntosh says don't stack them. (In fact, in the owner's manual, McIntosh suggests cutting a hole in the shelf above to ensure adequate ventilation.)

Fit'n'finish is superb. Both chassis feature the same load-bearing handles found on other premium McIntosh models; the handles are both functional and aesthetic. Aesthetics are further enhanced by the traditional, backlit McIntosh logos against black glass and, on the preamplifier module, a pair of meters that glow blue and windows that display green-illuminated 12AX7 tubes. Captain Nemo would dig it.

I asked McIntosh whether this two-box approach improved the preamp's specifications. Joe Guelzow, McIntosh Labs' electronic design engineer, responded: "Yes, when compared to other tube preamplifiers we produce at McIntosh, reduction in noise can be [lower] by at least 4dB and even 10dB, depending on the input. The dual-chassis design completely separates all power supply, microprocessor, and control circuits from the pure audio circuits for total noise isolation." The specified S/N ratio of the high-level output is rated at an impressive –107dB (A-weighted), measured at 2.5V. If that's accurate, this is an exceptionally quiet preamplifier.[2]

Unusually for a two-channel preamp, the rear panels of both chassis are relatively full. The controller's back panel is dominated by trigger inputs and outputs on 3.5mm mini-stereo jacks, in-

1 See stereophile.com/tubepreamps/806mac/index.html.

2 As I was editing, it occurred to me that S/N ratio would be different for the tubed and solid state sections—wouldn't it? I sent a note to Guelzow, who was kind enough to measure the S/N ratio for the sections separately. His results, via the balanced outputs: 109.1dB at the solid state outputs, 108.8dB at the tubed outputs. Why are these numbers so much higher than JA's? Guelzow's measurements were made at 2.5V; John's were made at 1V. That's a difference of 8dB. Assuming a fixed noise level, this brings the two sets of measurements precisely into line.—**Jim Austin**

measurements, continued

the power amplifier has an input impedance of 10k ohms or higher, the C12000's low frequencies won't sound lightweight.

The preamplifier's frequency response into high impedances in SS mode was flat from 10Hz to 50kHz and down by just 1.7dB at 200kHz (fig.1, blue and red traces). This graph was taken with the volume control set to "100%"—the superb channel matching was retained at lower settings of the control. The C12000's response into 600 ohms (green and gray traces) was the same as that into the high impedance over most of the band but rolled off in the bass due to the increased output impedance in this region. The response into 100k ohms in Tube mode (fig.2, blue and red traces) was still flat in the audioband but was now down by 4.4dB at 200kHz.

The McIntosh preamplifier's channel separation (not shown) was superb, at >130dB in both directions below 1kHz, and a still superb 120dB at the top of the audioband. The C12000 offered extremely low noise from all its outputs, with no power-supply–related spuriae even with the Tube output and the volume control set to the maximum (fig.3). The wideband, unweighted signal/noise ratio, measured with the unbalanced input shorted to ground but the volume control set to "100%," was a very good 78.5dB ref. 1V for the balanced SS output, 81dB for the balanced T output, and 84dB for the single-ended output in Tube mode. Restricting the measurement bandwidth to the audioband increased these ratios by 15dB, while switching an A-weighting filter into circuit further improved the ratios by 2–3dB.

Not only is the C12000 a very quiet preamplifier, it also offers very low levels of distortion and very high maximum output levels. Fig.4 plots the percentage of THD+noise in the McIntosh's balanced output in SS mode against the output voltage into 100k ohms with the volume control set to the maximum. Actual distortion lies beneath the noisefloor below an output of 5V then gradually rises above that level. We specify a preamplifier's clipping voltage as being when the THD+N reaches 1%, which occurs at 24V in fig.4; it was the same in Tube mode. The single-ended Main output clipped at 12V into 100k ohms, which is still much higher than the maximum level the preamplifier will be asked to deliver in typical use. The clipping voltage into the

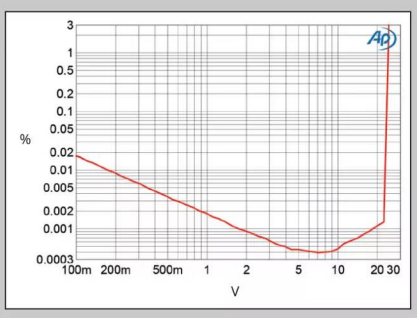


Fig.4 McIntosh C12000, balanced Solid State output, THD+N (%) vs 1kHz output voltage into 100k ohms.

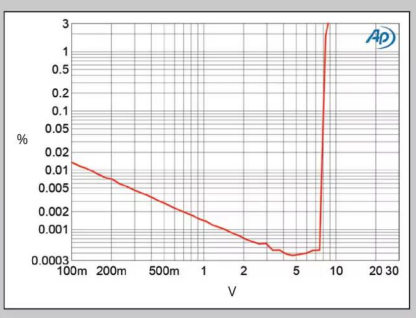


Fig.5 McIntosh C12000, balanced Tube output, THD+N (%) vs 1kHz output voltage into 600 ohms.

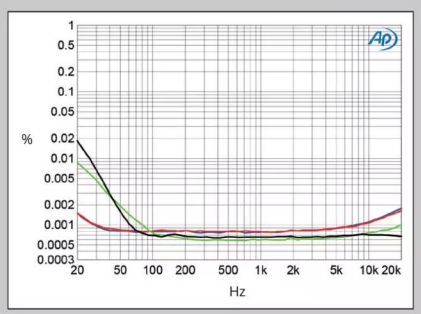
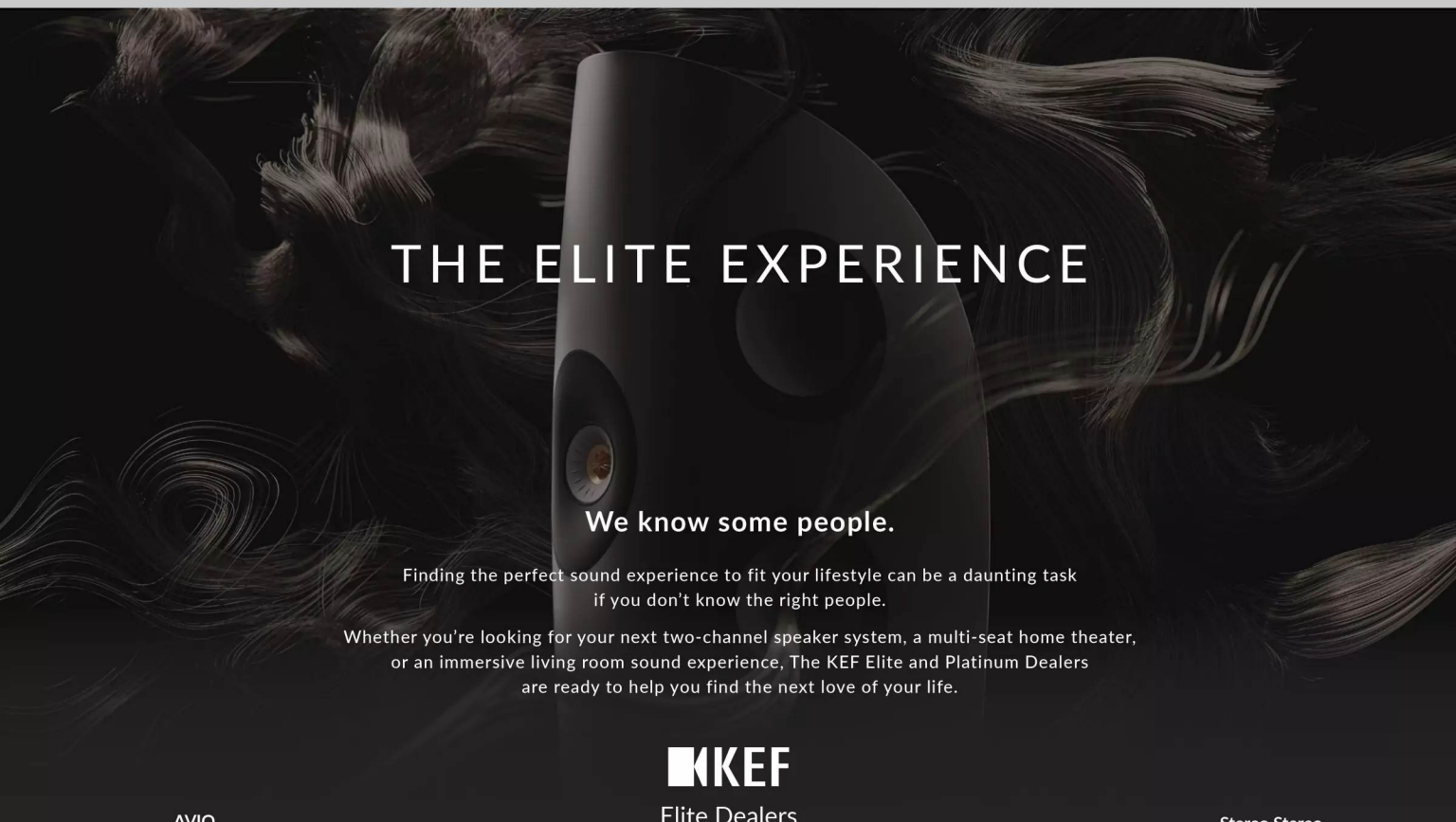


Fig.6 McIntosh C12000, balanced Tube output, THD+N (%) vs frequency at 5V into: 100k ohms (left channel blue, right red), 600 ohms (left green, right gray).

KEF Listen and believe



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tended to control other attached McIntosh components, sending remote-control signals and turning the lights on and off. The only other connectors on the controller's rear panel are a USB port for factory updates and the left- and right-channel connectors for the custom, 23-pin umbilical cables that connect the control module to the preamp module. An AC power cord socket completes the picture.

A glance at the preamp module's back panel gives an idea of what the C12000 designers were aiming for. It's what you don't see: There aren't any digital inputs. There's no DAC on board, just lots of old-school analog RCA and XLR jacks: six pairs of balanced line inputs and four pairs of single-ended line inputs plus two pairs of single-ended inputs for the phono stage. For outputs, there are two pairs of balanced, a pair of unbalanced labeled "Main," and another pair of unbalanced labeled "Rec/Fixed out." The two pairs of balanced outputs are labeled "1-SS" for solid state, "2-T" for tubed. To switch from solid state to tube, you switch from output 1 to output 2. The unbalanced Main outputs can be set to either tube or solid state via internal settings.

Here's another thing you won't see on the C12000, even behind the scenes in setup mode: tone controls. Other McIntosh preamplifiers have tone controls, whether accessed via internal menus or maybe staring you in the face as on the C53 preamp and its eight-knob front-panel equalizer. The C12000 is obviously intended as a minimalist, high-performance preamp. Joe Guelzow again: "Integrating analog tone controls into a system such as this one would also introduce noise, due to the amount of components needed to be able to integrate analog tone controls. Alternatively, digital tone controls could also introduce their own high-frequency noise while also taking away from the 'pure analog' many enthusiasts desire." Include me out. I don't want tone controls and wouldn't use them.

The phono stage is tube-based; there is no solid state option. For this reviewer, that is totally cool, as it allows for trying different

measurements, continued

current-hungry 600 ohm load was 8.23V from both types of balanced output (fig.5) as well as from the Main output.

To ensure that the THD+N reading was not dominated by noise, I measured how the C12000's distortion changed with frequency at an output level of 5V. The THD+N percentage into 100k ohms was superbly low throughout the audioband (fig.6, blue and red traces) but rose in the low bass into 600 ohms (green, gray traces). This graph was taken with the Tube output; the Solid State output behaved identically.

Fig.7 shows the preamplifier's spectrum with the balanced SS output driving 2V into 100k ohms. The highest-level harmonic is the second, at just –117dB (0.00014%). This harmonic rose by 5dB in Tube mode (fig.8), but this is still extremely low in level. The level of the second harmonic in both modes rose to –100dB (0.001%) into 600 ohms and was joined by the third harmonic at –110dB (0.0003%). Tested for intermodulation distortion with an equal mix of 19 and 20kHz tones at the same peak voltage level, all the intermodulation products lay at a negligible –120dB (0.0001%, fig.9) or lower.

Turning to the preamplifier's phono inputs, I connected a wire from one of the ground terminals on the preamplifier chassis's back panel to a grounding post on the Audio Precision analyzer to minimize hum. The two phono inputs can be configured for moving coil or moving magnet cartridges, and the gain and resistive and capacitive loadings can be adjusted accordingly. The phono inputs preserved absolute polarity at all the preamplifier's outputs. With the gain set to "40," the gain at the Rec/Fixed outputs with a 1kHz signal was 40.64dB. It was 15dB higher at the single-ended Main output and 21dB higher at the balanced outputs. Each 6dB increase in the nominal gain setting increased the gain by 6dB, and at the maximum setting of "64," the gain was 64.5dB at the Rec/Fixed output, 79.6dB at the Main output, and 85.6dB at the balanced output.

The input impedance can also be set to values between 25 ohms and 47k ohms. With the capacitive loading set to 100pF, the measured input impedances were all close to the nominal values. The only exception was the 47k ohm setting, where I measured 40.5k ohms at 20Hz, 41.9k ohms at 1kHz, and 39.5k ohms at 20kHz.

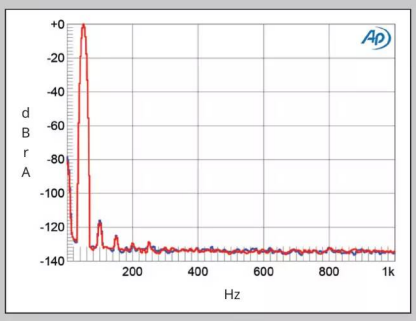

Fig.7 McIntosh C12000, balanced Solid State output, spectrum of 50Hz sinewave, DC–1kHz, at 2V into 100k ohms (left channel blue, right red; linear frequency scale).

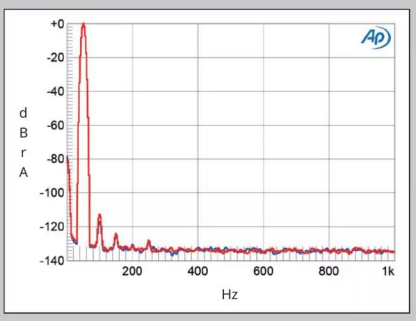

Fig.8 McIntosh C12000, balanced Tube output, spectrum of 50Hz sinewave, DC–1kHz, at 2V into 100k ohms (left channel blue, right red; linear frequency scale).

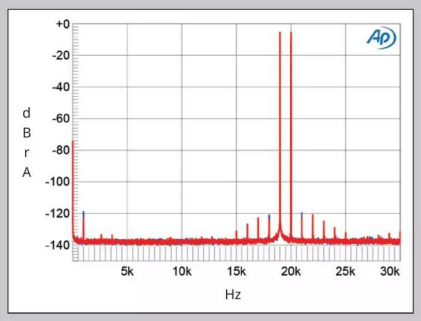

Fig.9 McIntosh C12000, balanced Solid State output, HF intermodulation spectrum, DC–30kHz, 19+20kHz at 2V into 600 ohms (left channel blue, right red; linear frequency scale).

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combinations of tube and solid state amplification. You can use a tubed phono stage into a solid state line stage. You can run a solid state output to a subwoofer and send the tubed output to the loudspeaker amplifiers.

Moving on to front panels: The preamplifier module's front panel is simple. Beyond the aforementioned logo, meters, and tubes, the only front-panel element is a 1/4" headphone jack, about which more later.

The controller's front panel is where the operational action takes place. Two large knobs control Input and Volume. Two small knobs operate various setup controls. Four push switches are labeled Setup, HXD, Mute, and Standby/On. In the middle is an information window.

Operating in tandem with the controller unit is a large, multipurpose remote control—almost a wand, really—measuring 9 1/2" long. It's what you'd call "Universal," able to control other components in your system, McIntosh components in particular.

Internal affairs

What's inside? Ron Cornelius, McIntosh product specialist, gave me an overview: "The most important difference between the C12000 and all other McIntosh preamps is, it is both dual mono and fully balanced. ... In the C12000 control module, each channel's power supply has its own R-core power transformer, and in the C12000 preamp module, each channel has its own circuit boards. The C12000 has twice the parts installed in twice the chassis to achieve the highest possible performance as compared [for example] to the C2700 preamplifier. Balanced circuits, like balanced cables, will cancel induced noise." Design engineer Guelzow piled on: "The tube circuitry is specifically tuned for the 12AX7As and 12AT7 vacuum tubes utilized in the C12000's circuits, while the solid state channels utilize a discrete, high-fidelity, fully differential audio operational amplifier to drive their outputs."

For some time, I have pondered the relationship between performance specifications published by manufacturers and the actual, audible results. How do measurable factors such as distortion and signal-to-noise ratio relate to subjective soundstage and timbral quality? I asked Ron Cornelius to share his/McIntosh's opinion: "McIntosh designs for the lowest possible distortion and highest signal to noise. These two are often related. As to sound quality, image size, and dynamic range, the total gain of the preamp and the maximum voltage output are important. The C12000's maximum output voltage range is higher than our other models, at 10V RMS unbalanced and 20V RMS balanced."

The C12000's 12AX7A-based tubed phono stage achieves outstanding specifications; 0.05% THD, S/N ratio of 83dB (A-weighted). There are two single-ended phono inputs. Instead of one being dedicated to moving magnet, the other to moving coil, as is often the case, each input can be adjusted as desired. Resistive and capacitive loading and gain settings can be set independently for

measurements, continued

I performed the subsequent tests of the McIntosh's phono inputs at the Rec/Fixed output. The C12000's RIAA equalization was superbly accurate up to 20kHz (fig.10), with a slight rise at ultrasonic frequencies and a low-frequency rolloff of 3dB at 10Hz. Channel matching was excellent. Channel separation (not shown) was close to 70dB in both directions across the audioband.

The phono input's unweighted, wideband S/N ratio, measured with the input shorted to ground, depended on the gain setting. In the worst case, with 64dB of gain, it was still a very good 71.8dB (average of both channels), ref. 1kHz at 500µV. Restricting the measurement bandwidth to 22Hz–22kHz increased the ratio to 76dB in both channels, and inserting an A-weighting filter gave a ratio of 80.7dB. Spectral analysis of the C12000 phono input's low-frequency noisefloor (not shown) revealed low levels of random noise components and no AC supply–related spuriae.

The C12000's phono input's overload margins varied with the gain setting. At the lowest gain of 40dB, the margin, ref. 1kHz at the standard MM level of 5mV, was an excellent 26.4dB at 20Hz and 1kHz, and still 23dB at the top of the audioband. Each 6dB increase in gain reduced the overload margins by around 3dB, but even with 64dB of gain, the margins ref. the standard MC level of 500µV were a high 23dB from 20Hz to 20kHz.

The McIntosh's phono inputs offered very low distortion. Fig.11 shows the spectrum of the preamplifier's output reproducing an input signal of 1kHz at 20mV with the gain set to 46dB. The only distortion harmonics that can be seen above the noisefloor are the second, at –100dB (0.001%), and the third, at –104dB (0.0006%). The phono inputs also offered a low level of intermodulation distortion. Even with the level of an equal mix of 19kHz and 20kHz tones lying 5dB below the overload voltage, the second-order difference product lay at –64dB (0.05%) and the higher-order products were all 30dB lower in level (fig.12).

With both its line and phono inputs, the McIntosh C12000's measured performance is among the best I have encountered from a preamplifier.—**John Atkinson**

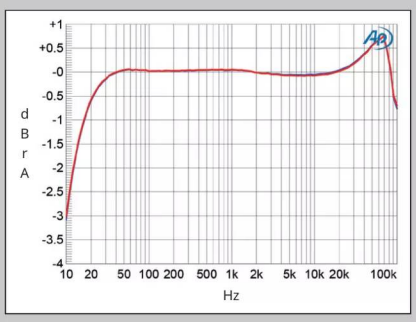

Fig.10 McIntosh C12000, phono input, response with RIAA correction (left channel blue, right red) (0.5dB/vertical div.).

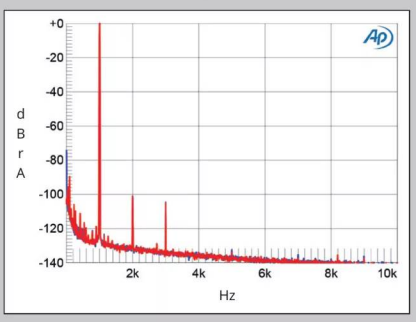

Fig.11 McIntosh C12000, phono input, 46dB gain, spectrum of 1kHz sinewave, DC–10kHz, for 20mV input (left channel blue, right red, linear frequency scale).

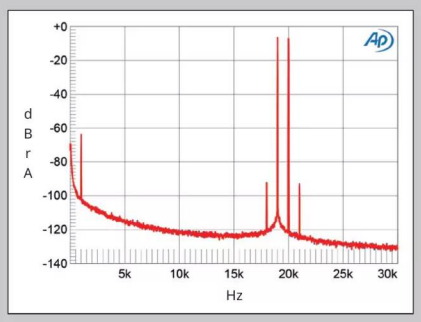

Fig.12 McIntosh C12000, phono input, 46dB gain, HF intermodulation spectrum, DC–30kHz, 19+20kHz for 100mV peak input (left channel blue, right red, linear frequency scale).

each. Two MC cartridges? No problem. Users who run two tonearms or turntables are provided for.

You may not get a DAC with this C12000 meatball, but you do get a high-power, class-A headphone amplifier, output from that 1/4" jack on the preamplifier module front panel. You can choose from three gain/impedance settings for optimal headphone matching. And there is one unique, defeatable headphone setting, which McIntosh has trademarked with the acronym HXD: Headphone Crossfeed Director. When engaged, this circuitry crossfeeds portions of the left- and right-channel signals to more closely match the experience of loudspeaker listening—to liberate the stereo image from inside your skull.

The Golden Road (to Unlimited Devotion)

Setup was easy. After connecting cables, my first order of business was to narrow the many available inputs down to the ones I actually use: one balanced, line-level input fed from my Bricasti DAC and one phono input from my VPI turntable. Unusually for a preamplifier, you must also choose an output, tubed or solid state. Any unused outputs can be turned off. Inputs can be renamed, their trim levels adjusted. I set phono gain and loading to appropriate levels. Then I started listening.

I began my listening by A/B-ing solid state and tubed outputs, both via balanced connections. I turned to Decca Records' 2022 remastering of George Solti's masterpiece recording of Wagner's *Der Ring Des Nibelungen* (Decca 455 555). Jumping straight to Act III of *Götterdämmerung*, the brief overture, the horns, as they build up slowly, were more easily differentiated via the solid state output. In Act III, I found "Siegfried's Funeral March" more musical via the tubed output as the huge trumpet crescendi waves began to break on the rocks below Valhalla. Both presentations, though, were equally valid. Listening preferences vary, along with the sonic behavior of associated systems. The C12000 is designed to accommodate that. I went back and forth but listened mostly with tubes.

Hearing this reborn Wagner was the most riveting hi-fi experience I've had lately. I own the original LP box—rather, boxes—as well as Decca's CD box set from 1997. But advances in digital restoration techniques, when properly applied, are changing the ballgame. Experienced with this system, with the McIntosh C12000 doing the preamplification, the results were mind-blowing. Never before has the introduction of a component in my reference system motivated me to listen to Wagner's entire *Ring* Cycle—but that's what happened. I couldn't stop. The quantity of musical information being launched at me was almost overwhelming, in a way I think Wagner would approve of, with both types of output from the C12000, tubed and solid state. All those fabulous sound effects, the opera stars moving around the Sofiensaal studio in Vienna, singing their lungs out, the blasts from the brass, the rhythmic energy of the strings. Is this the greatest recording ever made? It was for me, right then.

Speaking of great: A recording I often pick when evaluating a new component is Shirley Horn's great 1992 album, *Here's to Life*. In an interview, current Blue Note head Don Was described it to me as "a genius record." Listening to the CD (Verve 314 511 879-2), I sent the balanced AES3 output from my Pro-Ject CD Box RS2 T transport to my recently upgraded, dual-mono Bricasti M1 Series II DAC. The DAC's analog output passed into one of the balanced inputs of the McIntosh C12000 Preamplifier then to the T (for Tube) balanced output, from thence into my McIntosh MC462 amplifier. I heard a superwide soundstage; great definition from the Fender Bass; beautiful, silent, black background during the pauses Shirley specializes in. Her vocals sounded among the best I have heard them, and I've heard them a lot.

Switching to LP, I did a direct A/B comparison between the C12000's tubed phono stage and the all-tube Audio Research Reference Phono 3SE, which has been in my Upstairs System for several years. This was tough competition for the McIntosh; the phono-pre–only Audio Research costs significantly more than the C12000 does.

Next I chose a 2022 Mercury Living Presence reissue of Chabrier's *España*, conducted by Paul Paray (Mercury/Decca SR90212). At first I thought the Audio Research displayed a little more top-end air, a bit more sparkle and definition from triangles and tambourines. But when I increased the gain from the phono stage in the McIntosh C12000 to its maximum value of 64dB—adjusting the volume to compensate—that difference went away. (Such an effect could also be corrected by adjusting resistive loading, but I didn't need to try that.) Both preamps contributed to a wide soundstage, and low strings sounded very fine.

After John Atkinson had concluded his measurements and returned the C12000 to me, I had time to revisit my listening notes. I used the Chabrier *España* recording to make another comparison between the tubed versus the solid state outputs. This music, and its recording, are percussive and impactful. I got a huge kick in the pants from the solid state presentation; the dynamics were more impressive compared to the tubed output and just plain fun.

Tubes or solid stage? The genre of the music, and the type of the recording, will influence your choice. It's good to have access to both.

Which child do you love the most? I had on hand a new, all-tube McIntosh C2700 preamplifier, so I was able to encourage sibling rivalry. The C2700 is the smaller child, weighing slightly more than the C12000's control chassis alone, its price roughly half that of the C12000, even though it includes a DAC. (So what does that mean? It's gifted?) I cued up a reissue LP of Marvin Gaye's *What's Going On?* from 2019 (Tamla/Motown 0731453002210). Currently occupying the #1 slot on *Rolling Stone*'s greatest albums list, this 1971 masterpiece really shined for me. With either preamp, I found it easy to differentiate the layers of Marvin's beautiful vocal overdubs. The orchestrations by David Van DePitte sounded superb—

and that haunting percussion! Given this choice, I would have to go with the C12000; the soundstage seemed a tad wider and deeper, the timbres richer. The C2700 sounded good, but it seemed a little busier with less clarity, and the frequency range, subjectively, seemed a bit more extended through the C12000, top and bottom.

Trying out the HDX headphone output on the C12000 was also interesting. As noted previously, the HDX "Headphone Crossfeed Director Circuitry" can be turned on and off, either in Setup mode or with the dedicated switch labeled HDX on the controller module's front panel. For evaluating soundstage and imaging, it makes sense to reach for something acoustic, not some electric pop studio fantasy corresponding to no acoustic reality, so I pulled out the Emerson Quartet performing the Beethoven string quartets (CD, DG 477 8649).

When I listen to string quartet recordings, I'm picturing where the players are sitting in relation to each other. McIntosh states that HXD "restores the directionality component of the spatial sound stage." What I heard when I punched this circuit in was a pronounced centering of the soundstage. Reverberation to the sides vanished. There was still some stereo placement, but much narrowed. With this recording, the HDX functioned as what I'd call a half a mono switch. Since the C12000 does not include a mono switch—well, there it is if you want it.

A rose by any other name

People who invent new roses utilize a process called hybridization. Thousands of new roses can be traced back to a few wild rose species. McIntosh has cross-pollinated tubed and solid state electronics, resulting in lovely sonic flavors and colors. The C12000 blends the best from both worlds while also offering a choice, honoring both innovation and tradition. My time auditioning the C12000 was memorable. Considering its flexibility, whatever your priorities, now and in the future, the McIntosh C12000 2-Channel Solid State and Vacuum Tube Preamplifier merits close consideration if you can swing the price. I bought the review sample. Definitively Class A. ■

ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT

Analog sources VPI HW-40 turntable, VPI 12" Fatboy tonearm, Pro-Ject Classic EVO turntable, Lyra Etna cartridge, Ortofon Bronze Cadenza cartridge, Sumiko Amethyst cartridge.
Digital sources MacBook Air running Tidal, Roon, Qobuz. Bricasti M1 Series II DAC, Musical Fidelity M1 CDT transport, Pro-Ject CD Box RS2 T.
Preamplification Audio Research Corporation REF3 Phono Preamplifier, Audio Research Corporation REF6 Preamplifier, McIntosh C2700 Preamplifier.
Power amplifiers McIntosh MC462 Quad Balanced Stereo Amplifier, McIntosh MA252 Integrated Amplifier.
Loudspeakers Harbeth C7ES-3 XD, Wilson Audio Specialties Sasha DAW.
Cables Digital: AudioQuest Diamond AES3, Coffee USB; Interconnects: AudioQuest Fire, Sky; Speaker: AudioQuest Firebird, Robin Hood; AC: AudioQuest Dragon.
Accessories AudioQuest Niagara 7000 power conditioner. Mapleshade equipment rack. TonTrager speaker stands (for Harbeths). Audiodesksysteme Vinyl Cleaner Pro. VPI Periphery Ring Clamp. IsoAcoustics isolation footers. Gingko Audio Cloud Platforms.—**Sasha Matson**

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JOHN ATKINSON

Monitor Audio Platinum 300 3G

LOUDSPEAKER

Loudspeakers from British manufacturer Monitor Audio have consistently received favorable reviews in *Stereophile* over the past decades. From the R952MD I reviewed in January 1988 to the Silver 500 7G reviewed by Rob Schryer in February 2022,[1] Monitor Audio speakers have offered excellent sound quality and high-quality engineering. So when I was offered the company's Platinum 300 3G for review, I readily agreed. Having lived with standmounts and minimonitors for the past year, I felt it would be good to spend some time with a pair of large, full-range, three-way floorstanders.

The Platinum 300 3G

With its elegant-looking enclosure featuring a gently curved front baffle and sidewalls and a concave rear panel, and its drive unit array of folded ribbon tweeter, 4" midrange unit, and two 8" woofers, Monitor Audio's Platinum 300 3G looks very similar to the Platinum PL300 II loudspeaker that Robert Deutsch reviewed in November 2016.[2] Those speakers cost $14,496/pair back then; the 3Gs cost $17,900/pair, which, adjusted for inflation, is a lower price than that of its predecessor.

There are significant differences, however, all intended to reduce distortion and increase driver bandwidths. The new Micro Pleated Diaphragm (MPD) III tweeter, a variant of the Heil Air Motion Transformer (AMT), was developed for Monitor Audio's 50th Anniversary flagship Hyphn loudspeaker. The crossover from the midrange unit is set at 3kHz, and the tweeter's passband is said to extend to above 60kHz compared to >40kHz for a typical AMT tweeter. Monitor Audio's downloadable brochure mentions a gentle rise on-axis to maximize high-frequency detail. The square tweeter diaphragm is surrounded with a waveguide to control directivity.

The midrange unit operates from 650Hz to 3kHz. Both its cone and those of the woofers are made from a material Monitor Audio

1 See stereophile.com/floorloudspeakers/188mon/index.html and stereophile.com/content/monitor-audio-silver-500-7g-loudspeaker.

2 See stereophile.com/content/monitor-audio-platinum-pl300-ii-loudspeaker.

SPECIFICATIONS

Description Three-way, reflex-loaded, floorstanding loudspeaker. Drive units: two 8" (203mm) RDT III woofers, 4" (102mm) RDT III midrange unit, MPD III tweeter. Port tuning frequency: 32Hz. Crossover frequencies: 650Hz, 3kHz. Frequency response: 25Hz–60kHz, –6dB (free-field); 17Hz–60kHz, –6dB (in-room). Nominal impedance: 4 ohms. Minimum impedance: 4.0 ohms at 3.75kHz. Sensitivity: 88dB/2.83V/m (free-field). Recommended power: 200–800W, music program. Maximum continuous power handling: 400W, pink noise with 6dB crest factor. Supplied accessories: screw-in cone feet, foam port plugs, 6mm hex key for adjusting feet, Torx tool for adjusting drive units, cleaning cloth.

Dimensions 44.5" (1130mm) H × 16.9" (429mm) W × 20.6" (523mm) D with trims, terminals & outrigger feet. Weight: 118lb (53.6kg) each.

Finish Piano Black, Piano Ebony, and Pure Satin White, embellished with etched inlays.

Serial numbers of units reviewed 100136 (both).

"Designed in Britain. Made in China."

Price $17,900/pair. Approximate number of US dealers: 95. Warranty: 5 years.

Manufacturer Monitor Audio, 24 Brook Rd., Rayleigh, Essex SS6 7XJ, England, UK.
Web: monitoraudio.com.
US distributor:
Kevro International,
902 McKay Rd., Suite 4,
Pickering, ON L1W 3X8, Canada.
Web: kevro.com.

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calls Rigid Diaphragm Technology (RDT) III. At the front of the three-layer diaphragm is a skin of ceramic-coated aluminum. Behind it lies a Nomex honeycomb, and behind that are two layers of carbon fiber to reduce cone breakup. The new units are said to have an optimized cone-edge treatment to extend their passbands, and the cones are terminated with inverse rubber surrounds.

The lower-frequency drive units are mounted in cast aluminum rings that isolate the driver chassis from the cabinet. There is no visible mounting hardware on the front baffle. Instead, there are bolt-through fixings that connect each driver to the rear panel while acting as a rigid brace. The termination of each bolt on the rear panel has a central Torx screw that can be used to ensure that the fixing hasn't worked loose in transit or use. A Torx key is included.

The curved, braced enclosure is made from laminated layers of MDF. The veneered finish is embellished with etched inlays before 16 layers of lacquer are added. The enclosure sits on four aluminum outriggers, which can be fitted with conical feet. The midrange unit is mounted in its own sealed subenclosure. The woofers are loaded with two gently flared rear-panel ports. Foam bungs are provided in case the 300 3G's low frequencies sound exaggerated in a small room or if the speakers have to be placed close to a room boundary, though Monitor Audio warns that only one port bung should be used for each speaker. Electrical connec-

MEASUREMENTS

I used DRA Labs' MLSSA system and a calibrated DPA 4006 microphone with an Earthworks microphone preamplifier to measure the Monitor Audio Platinum 300 3G's farfield frequency behavior and dispersion. For the nearfield responses, I used an Earthworks QTC-40 mike, which has a 1/4" capsule and thus doesn't present a significant obstacle to the sound. I also used this microphone for the in-room behavior. The impedance magnitude and electrical phase angle were measured with Dayton Audio's DATS V2 system.

Monitor Audio specifies the Platinum 300 3G's free-field sensitivity as 88dB/2.83V/m, which was confirmed by my measurement. The Platinum 300 3G's impedance is specified as 4 ohms, with a minimum magnitude of 4.0 ohms at 3.75kHz. With the ports open,[1] the impedance remains between 4 ohms and 7 ohms for most of the audioband (fig.1, solid trace), with minimum values of 4.2 ohms at 124Hz and 3.75kHz. The electrical phase angle (dashed trace) is occasionally high; the effective resistance, or EPDR,[2] therefore drops below 4 ohms between 27Hz and 330Hz and below 3 ohms between 66Hz and 128Hz and between 2.4kHz and 5.9kHz. The minimum EPDR values are 2 ohms at 85Hz and 1.85 ohms at 4.2kHz. The Platinum 300 3G is a relatively demanding load for amplifiers; tubed designs will best be used from their 4 ohm output taps.

The traces in fig.1 are free from the small discontinuities in the midrange that would imply the existence of cabinet resonances. When I investigated the enclosure's vibrational behavior with a plastic-tape accelerometer, I found some resonant modes on the sidewalls level with the woofers (fig.2). As well as being low in level, these modes have a high Q (Quality Factor), which will work against this behavior having audible consequences.

The saddle centered on 33Hz in the magnitude trace in fig.1 indicates that this is the tuning frequency of the two ports on the Monitor Audio's rear panel. The ports

1 With both ports blocked with the foam bungs, the impedance magnitude was typical of a sealed-box alignment, with a single low-frequency peak at 49Hz.

2 EPDR is the resistive load that gives rise to the same peak dissipation in an amplifier's output devices as the loudspeaker. See "Audio Power Amplifiers for Loudspeaker Loads," *JAES*, Vol.42 No.9, September 1994, and stereophile.com/reference/707heavy/index.html.

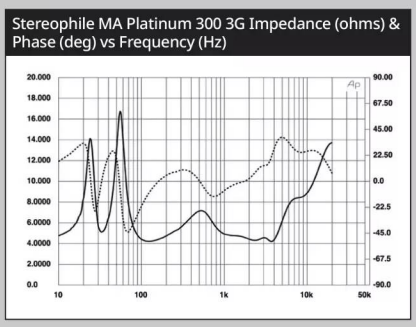

Fig.1 Monitor Audio Platinum 300 3G, ports open, electrical impedance (solid) and phase (dashed) (2 ohms/vertical div.).

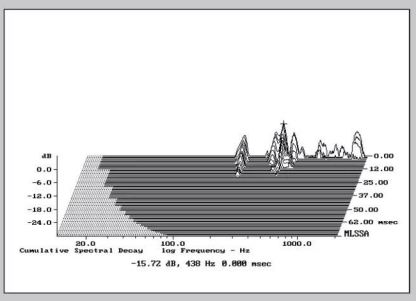

Fig.2 Monitor Audio Platinum 300 3G, cumulative spectral-decay plot calculated from output of accelerometer fastened to center of sidewall level with lower woofer (MLS driving voltage to speaker, 7.55V; measurement bandwidth, 2kHz).

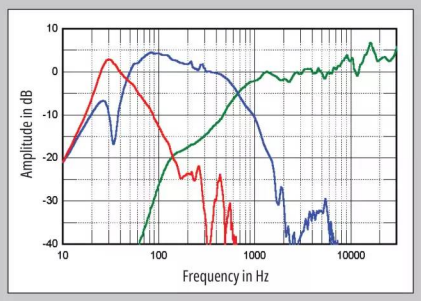

Fig.3 Monitor Audio Platinum 300 3G, acoustic crossover on tweeter axis at 50", corrected for microphone response, with the nearfield responses of the midrange unit (green), woofers (blue), and ports (red), respectively plotted below 400Hz, 300Hz, and 600Hz.

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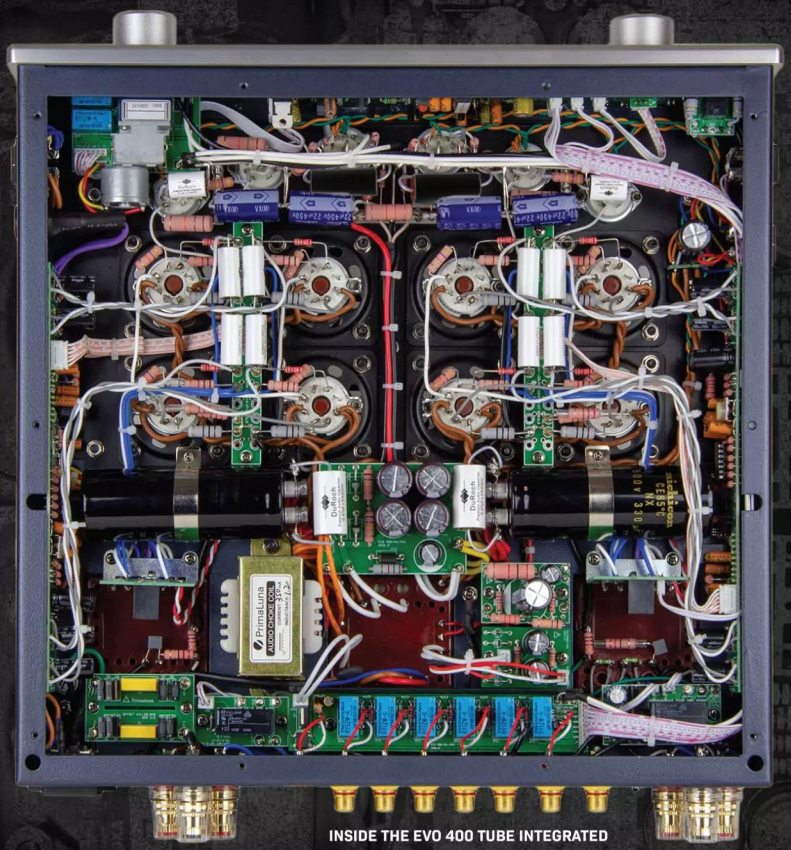

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tion is via two pairs of high-quality binding posts, connected with short jumper cables.

Setting up

Monitor Audio's informative manual recommends that the loudspeakers be positioned 6–10' feet apart, no closer than 3' from the sidewalls, and 12–24" from the wall behind them. The latter is not possible in my listening room due to there being two steps up to a vestibule behind the right-hand speaker. After some experimentation, the Platinum 300 3G's front baffles ended up 80" from the wall behind the speakers, the woofers 96" from each other. The right-hand woofers were 47" from the books that line that speaker's closest sidewall, and the left-hand woofers were 33" from the LPs that line that speaker's sidewall. The Platinum 300 3Gs were toed-in to the listening position, which was 127" away. Once I had settled on what I felt were the speakers' optimal positions, I screwed the downward-pointing cones into the outrigger feet.

The main source of music was my Roon Nucleus+ server feeding audio data over my network to an MBL N31 CD player/DAC, which was connected first to my regular Parasound Halo JC 1+ monoblocks then to the Naim 200 series NAP 250 that Martin Colloms reviews elsewhere in this issue. I also used my NAD M10 streaming integrated amplifier, followed by the Audio Research I/50 integrated amplifier I reviewed in September, then by the Musical Fidelity Nu-Vista 800.2 integrated amplifier that I will be reviewing for the

measurements, continued

behaved identically, and the red trace in fig.3 shows their response measured in the nearfield. The output reaches its maximum just below the tuning frequency, and while some low-level peaks are present between 250Hz and 600Hz, the upper-frequency rollout is otherwise clean. The two woofers also behaved identically, and their nearfield output (blue trace) has the expected minimum-motion notch at the tuning frequency of the ports. The woofers cross over to the midrange unit (green trace) close to the specified 650Hz, with a clean upper-frequency rollout. The farfield response of the midrange unit and tweeter is flat in the low- and mid-treble regions but rises in the top octave, with a 6dB peak at 16kHz. I repeated this measurement with the Earthworks microphone and MLSSA set to its highest, 40kHz bandwidth and found another narrow peak an octave higher at 32kHz.

The complex sum of the woofer and port responses in fig.4 (black trace below 300Hz) has a 6dB rise in the midbass output. This is due to the nearfield measurement technique, which assumes that the drive units are mounted in a true infinite baffle. The Platinum 300 3G's low-frequency alignment is close to maximally flat; the output is down by 6dB at the specified free-field extension of 25Hz. The black trace above 300Hz in fig.4 shows the Platinum 300 3G's quasi-anechoic farfield response averaged across a 30° horizontal window centered on the tweeter axis. The response is even overall, with a very slight lack of energy between 1.5kHz and 2.5kHz and that rising trend above 7kHz. The pair matching between the two samples was excellent, any difference between them lying well within ±0.5dB.

Fig.5 shows the Platinum 300 3G's horizontal dispersion, normalized to the response on the tweeter axis, which thus appears as a straight line. The radiation pattern is even and doesn't start to narrow until 10kHz. The slight lack of low-treble energy in the on-axis response fills in to the speaker's sides. Fig.6 shows the speaker's radiation pattern in the vertical plane, again normalized to the tweeter-axis response, which is 40" from the floor. My ears are 4" lower than that, but the

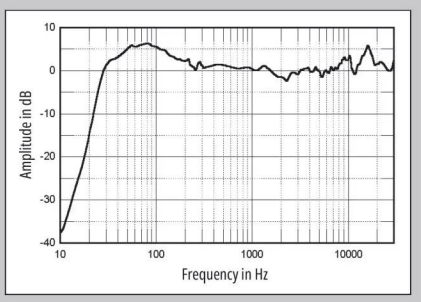

Fig.4 Monitor Audio Platinum 300 3G, anechoic response on tweeter axis at 50", averaged across a 30° horizontal window and corrected for microphone response, with the complex sum of the nearfield responses plotted below 300Hz.

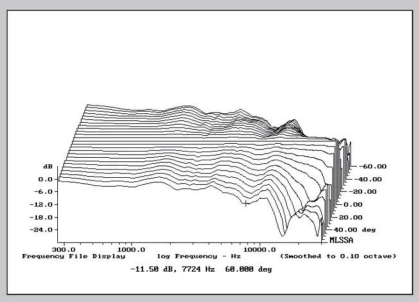

Fig.5 Monitor Audio Platinum 300 3G, lateral response family at 50", normalized to response on tweeter axis, from back to front: differences in response 60°–5° off axis, reference response, differences in response 5°–60° off axis.

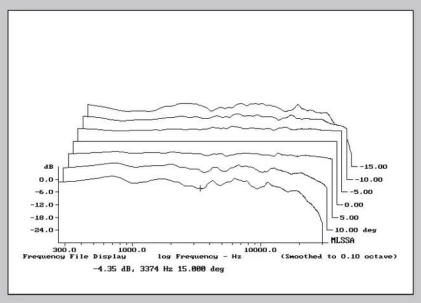

Fig.6 Monitor Audio Platinum 300 3G, vertical response family at 50", normalized to response on tweeter axis, from back to front: differences in response 15°–5° above axis, reference response, differences in response 5°–15° below axis.

December issue. The speakers were single-wired with AudioQuest Robin Hood cable.

Listening

The manual recommends that the Platinum 300 3Gs be used to play "normal music at low-mid listening levels for approximately 50–70 hours" to settle in. Accordingly, I used the speakers for a week's worth of casual playback before I started critical listening. I also checked with the supplied Torx key that the bolt-through driver fixings on the rear panel hadn't worked loose.

The dual-mono pink noise track on my *Editor's Choice* CD (STPH016-2) was reproduced as a stable central image. The noise sounded smooth and uncolored over most of the range, though the lowest bass was exaggerated. The half-step–spaced tonebursts on *Editor's Choice* spoke cleanly and evenly, though the lowest in frequency, at 32.7Hz, boomed, particularly from the right-hand speaker. When I listened to the 1/3-octave warble tones on *Editor's Choice*, the Platinum 300 3Gs cleanly reproduced the tones down to the 80Hz band, with the 63Hz, 50Hz, and 40Hz tones boosted in level. The 32Hz tone maximally excited the lowest-frequency room mode, and the 25Hz tone was more audible than I was expecting. I couldn't hear the 20Hz tone at my usual listening level. There was no audible wind noise from the ports. The warble tones sounded clean, with no distortion, and listening to the enclosure's walls with a stethoscope as the tonebursts played, I heard no liveliness.

A track I have recently been using to judge a speaker's low-frequency behavior is "All Too Well (Taylor's Version)" from Taylor Swift's album *Red* (24/96 FLAC, Big Machine Records/Qobuz). At 2:25, when Swift sings "'Cause there we are again in the middle of the night," the bass line drops an octave. The effect sounds awesome even on the little KEF LS50s, but on the Monitor Audio with the ports open, it was all too much.

I blocked both ports on each speaker and listened again to the low-frequency warble tones. Now the tones were reproduced evenly down to 63Hz, but the 50Hz and 40Hz tones were slightly suppressed. The 32Hz room mode was still boosted a little, but now I couldn't hear the 25Hz and 20Hz tones.

I ended up removing the foam plug from the bottom ports, which kept the magnificence of the

measurements, continued

Monitor Audio's response 5° below the tweeter axis is identical.

The red trace in fig.7 shows the Monitor Audio Platinum 300 3Gs' spatially averaged response in my listening room with their ports open.[3] The blue trace in fig.7 shows the spatially averaged response with all the ports blocked with the supplied foam plugs. With the ports open, the Platinum 300 3Gs maximally excite the lowest-frequency mode in my room, the frequency of which is close to the port-tuning frequency. With the ports closed, the in-room response slopes gently down below 100Hz. The peaks and dips in the lower midrange will be due to interference from reflections of the woofers' output from the floor; above that region, there is a reduction in the speakers' output in the treble, due to the increased absorption of the room's furnishings as the frequency increases, though this is not to as great a degree as with my KEF LS50s.[4]

In the time domain, the Platinum 300 3G's step response (fig.8) indicates that the tweeter and woofers are all connected in positive acoustic polarity, the midrange unit in inverted polarity. The tweeter's output arrives first at the microphone, and the decay of the tweeter's step blends with the start of the midrange unit's step, which implies an optimal crossover implementation. The Platinum 300 3G's cumulative spectral-decay plot (fig.9) is very clean overall. (Ignore the apparent low-level ridge of delayed energy just below 16kHz, which is due to interference from the MLSSA host PC's video circuitry.)

The Monitor Audio Platinum 300 3G's measured performance is similar to that of the earlier Platinum PL300 II, which Robert Deutsch reviewed in November 2016.[5] However, the new speaker's tweeter is connected in positive acoustic polarity, which eliminates a suckout in the upper crossover region above the tweeter axis. The horizontal dispersion is better controlled with the new speaker, and, as mentioned in Monitor Audio's promotional material, the on-axis output has a touch more energy in the top two audio octaves.

—John Atkinson

3 Using the FuzzMeasure 3.0 program, a Metric Halo MIO2882 FireWire-connected audio interface, and a 96kHz sample rate, I average 20 1/6-octave–smoothed spectra, individually taken for the left and right speakers, in a rectangular grid 36" wide by 18" high and centered on the positions of my ears.

4 See fig.7 at stereophile.com/content/kef-ls50-meta-loudspeaker-measurements.

5 See stereophile.com/content/monitor-audio-platinum-pl300-ii-loudspeaker-measurements.

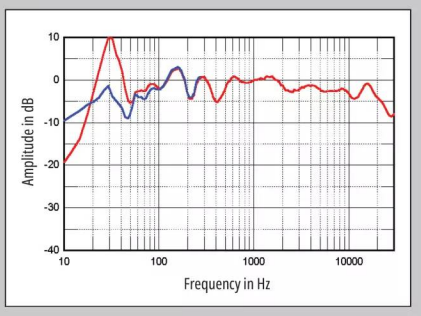

Fig.7 Monitor Audio Platinum 300 3G, spatially averaged, 1/6-octave response in JA's listening room with the ports open (red) and with the ports blocked (blue).

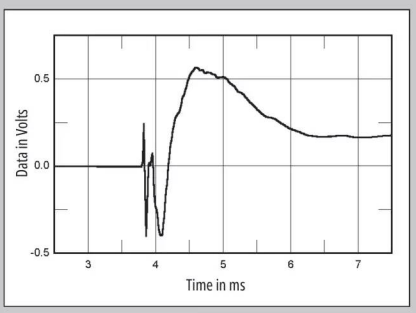

Fig.8 Monitor Audio Platinum 300 3G, step response on tweeter axis at 50" (5ms time window, 30kHz bandwidth).

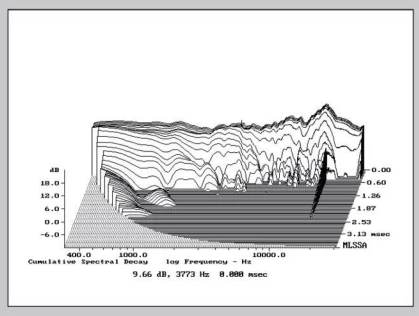

Fig.9 Monitor Audio Platinum 300 3G, cumulative spectral-decay plot on tweeter axis at 50" (0.15ms risetime).

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dropped bass on "All Too Well (Taylor's Version)" but didn't allow the excited room mode to get in the way of the music. With just one port blocked on each speaker, the low frequencies offered good extension and weight coupled with excellent leading-edge definition. The kickdrum on the Taylor Swift track was well-differentiated from the bass guitar, which was similarly pitched.

The image of Swift's voice was palpably focused. In this respect, the big Monitor Audios' imaging accuracy was more like what you get from a pair of high-performance minimonitors like my reference LS50s.

I have been a fan of Taj Mahal since he performed live at *Stereophile*'s Hi-Fi '95 show in Los Angeles, accompanying himself on piano and guitar. After reading Tony Scherman's review[3] of Taj Mahal's *Savoy* in the July issue, I added the album (24/96 FLAC, Stony Plain Records/Qobuz) to my Roon library. Mahal's croaky vocals were stably presented as a narrow central image, and the individual images of the women singing the refrain in "Mood Indigo" were clearly defined and spread across the stage.

What you hear in the way of imaging accuracy will depend, of course, on how a recording was made. While Sasha Matson justifiably praised the then–20-year-old Barbra Streisand's singing in his June 2023 Recording of the Month review[4] of *Live at the Bon Soir* (Legacy/Columbia), he noted that the piano sounded like it was "recorded in a coatroom." Listening to the 24/96 Qobuz stream of "Cry Me a River" on the Platinum 300 3Gs, the piano sounded more recessed than distant, but I was transfixed by how—forgive me for again using this word—palpably the speakers presented the image of Barbra's voice.

In 1992, I recorded Canadian pianist Robert Silverman live in concert with a spaced pair of omnidirectional microphones. The result is an image of the Steinway piano that is somewhat diffuse regardless of the imaging performance of the loudspeakers. Listening to Silverman's empathetic reading of Schubert's *Moments Musicaux* (16/44.1 ALAC, Stereophile STPH005-2) on the Platinum 300 3Gs, I heard the piano clearly set within the warmly supportive acoustic of the Albuquerque church in which I had made the recording. It was particularly so when the Platinum 300s were driven by the Audio Research I/50 using its 4 ohm output transformer taps.

As I note in the Measurements sidebar, the Platinum 300 3G is a relatively demanding load. When I hooked up the Monitor Audios to the tubed Audio Research I/50, I was concerned that the speakers would ask too much from the amplifier, even from its 4 ohm outputs. However, this didn't appear to be case, even with the Taylor Swift track, as long as I kept the spl at the listening chair below 88dB(C) (slow ballistics), as measured with the Studio Six iPhone app.

Looking back, I see I haven't commented yet on the Platinum 300 3G's degree of tonal neutrality. This speaker is commendably uncolored. Solo piano recordings are very revealing of problems in the upper midrange, but the piano on the Silverman concert recording sounded both natural and full range, with no notes emphasized. The only aspect of the Monitor Audio's sonic signature that did occasionally concern me was a slight emphasis to recorded sibilance, more noticeable with the solid state Naim and Parasound amplifiers than with the tubed Audio Research I/50 or, paradoxically perhaps, the class-D NAD. The I/50's top octave starts to roll off prematurely into low impedances,[5] which could account somewhat for its mitigation of this slight sibilance, though the shape of the Platinum 300 3G's impedance magnitude trace (fig.1 in the Measurements sidebar) suggests that this rolloff will be minimal.

I finished my critical listening sessions with *Joni Mitchell at Newport* (24/192 FLAC, Rhino/Qobuz), recorded live in 2022. What can I say? With its lack of coloration and neutral tonal balance, Monitor Audio's Platinum 300 3G did justice not just to Mitchell's age-deepened voice but to those of all the singers featured on this album.

Summing up

With its clean, uncolored midrange, its well-controlled, extended low frequencies, its well-defined stereo imaging, and its ability to play much louder than my usual minimonitors, Monitor Audio's elegant-looking Platinum 300 3G is a high-performance loudspeaker. Strongly recommended. ■

ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT

Digital sources Roon Nucleus+ file server; Ayre Acoustics C-5xe^{MP} universal player; MBL N31 CD player/DAC; Ayre Acoustics QA-9 A/D converter; NetGear Nighthawk router.
Integrated amplifiers NAD M10, Audio Research I/50, Musical Fidelity Nu-Vista 800.2.
Power amplifiers Parasound Halo JC 1+ monoblocks, Naim Classic 200 Series NAP 250.
Loudspeakers KEF LS50.
Cables Digital: AudioQuest Vodka (Ethernet), AudioQuest Coffee (USB), DH Labs (1m, AES3). Interconnect: AudioQuest Wild Blue (balanced). Speaker: AudioQuest Robin Hood. AC: AudioQuest Dragon Source & High Current, manufacturers' own.
Accessories 24" Celestion loudspeaker stands with KEFs; Ayre Acoustics Myrtle Blocks; ASC Tube Traps; RPG Abffusor panels; AudioQuest Niagara 5000 Low-Z Power/Noise-Dissipation System (amplifiers) and AudioQuest Niagara 1000 Low-Z Power/Noise-Dissipation System (source components), HDPlex linear power supply for Roon Nucleus+; AudioQuest Fog Lifters cable supports. AC power comes from two dedicated 20A circuits, each just 6' from breaker box.
Room 20' (left side), 25' (right side) × 16' × 8'.—**John Atkinson**

3 See stereophile.com/content/july-2023-jazz-record-reviews.

4 See stereophile.com/content/recording-june-2023-barbra-streisand-live-bon-soir.

5 See fig.1 at stereophile.com/content/audio-research-i50-integrated-amplifier-measurements.

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MARTIN COLLOMS

Naim Classic 200 Series NAP 250

POWER AMPLIFIER

For this modular audio component set—a review of the matching NSC 222 streamer preamp with a matching NPX 300 power supply is forthcoming—we first cover the standalone NAP 250 100Wpc stereo power amplifier, a new version of Naim's 200-series amplifier, now so extensively revised that it must be regarded as a new model.

It played louder without fatigue. It rocked on jazz and rock and seduced with classical.

Naim has long embraced two upgrade paths: the usual substitution route—replace an inferior component with a newer or better one—and progressive power-unit augmentation for components already installed. Setting aside for now the former route: Among many other changes, these Naim "New Classic"–series components may be more easily combined not only with other components from Naim but with items from other audio makers. This enhanced compatibility includes Naim legacy systems: All can now be mixed and matched more easily.

Naim Audio's enduring, compact 200-series stereo power amplifier has been relaunched as the NAP 250, a key component of their new 200 Series. It has been updated massively in its technology and the compatibility of its connections, yet the primary circuit concept, which dates to the mid-1970s, is essentially unchanged. Recent development work has focused on helping the amplifier match up well with the new NSC 222 streamer-preamp, the NAP 250's intended companion.

The new 200-series power amplifier is now called, simply, NAP 250, dropping the "DR" of the previous model. But while the suffix is now omitted, the ultralow-noise DR technology has been retained in the active, fully regulated power supplies; indeed, it has been improved.

For comparison, I had to hand a very recent sample of the now-superceded NAP 250 DR.

If it's not broke, fix it anyway

Over the years, I have tested several iterations of the 250. The outgoing "DR" version of the NAP 250 performed well in my recent evaluation in *HiFiCritic* (Vol.16 No.1). However, to better match the

SPECIFICATIONS

Description Balanced, two-channel power amplifier with soft startup. Analog inputs: Stereo pair XLR balanced; "legacy" single-ended adapter lead supplied. Loudspeaker outputs: 4mm sockets spaced for Naim Connector. Input impedance: 47k ohms balanced, 34k ohms single-ended. Gain: 29dB. Damping factor into 8 ohms: 36. Power output (nominal): 100W into 8 ohms (20dBW), 190W into 4 ohms (19.3dBW). Burst power: 300W into 2 ohms (18.8dBW) at 1kHz for 20ms. Frequency response: 1.4Hz–100kHz (+0, –3dB). Sensitivity: 1V (Gain: 29dB) for full output. THD+N: 0.013% at 1kHz at $^2/_3$ rated power into 8 ohms. S/N ratio at full output power (8 ohms), A-weighted: 111dB; at 1W, A-weighted: 91dB. Channel separation, 20Hz–20kHz: 60dB. Power consumption: 0.5W at standby, 26W at idle. Supplied accessories: Powerline Lite power cable, Naim XLR "standard" 2-channel interconnect cable.

Dimensions 17" (432mm) W × 3.6" (91.5mm) H × 12.5" (317mm) D. Weight: 37lb (16.8kg).

Finish Black aluminum alloy.

Serial number of unit reviewed 526509 auditioned, 518784 measured. Manufactured in Salisbury, UK, and elsewhere Europe.

Price $8999. Approximate number of US dealers: 22. Warranty: 2 years mechanical, 5 years electronics.

Manufacturer
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design and connectivity concepts envisaged for the new 200-series system, numerous operational and system changes were applied. That engineering process was allowed to run and run, resulting in a major design overhaul, sufficient to merit a fresh appraisal.

Externally, the traditional, green-illuminated Naim logo is now instead illuminated white, which may prove disconcerting for some diehard Naim fans. The brightness may be adjusted to suit ambient light intensity on all the units via a system control app or a back-panel button, but green cannot be restored. The old, shallower, all-alloy profile has been replaced by a new one with flanking sections of thicker alloy with a polished, recessed center section in black acrylic, to better harmonize with the rest of the 200 series.

Traditional aluminum-alloy construction is maintained to avoid the possibility of ferromagnetic interaction of the active electronics with the casing. The old, nonstandard connection to the single unbalanced dual-channel XLR input has been supplanted by a pair of standard-format XLRs for the L and R channels. These are now fully balanced, with higher input impedance (47k ohms balanced, up from the original 18k ohms) so they draw less current from the signal source. With the appropriate cable termination, the NAP 250's balanced inputs may be driven from unbalanced sources thanks to the universal, self-balancing input-circuit topology. This connection, which Naim refers to as "legacy," has a somewhat lower input impedance, specified at 34k ohms, but that's still usefully higher than 18k ohms, the value on the previous "DR" version. Though output impedance isn't specified, if the specified damping factor (36 with an 8 ohm load) is accurate, it is about 0.2 ohms.[1]

The loudspeaker output connections are unchanged from earlier models: Naim-standard, spaced 4mm sockets, for which Naim also makes an inexpensive, proprietary, reliable bipolar plug designed to ensure unambiguous polarity. Nonpaired 4mm plugs may also be used. The NAP 250 incorporates eddy-current suppression at the loudspeaker output connections, in common with the reference-level Naim "Statement" power amplifier. In most amplifiers, these connections are made through a conductive-alloy back panel, which gives rise to a circulating current in the

1 JA measured 0.31 ohms, rising slightly to 0.32 at the top of the audioband. That would suggest instead a damping factor of about 26.—**Jim Austin**

MEASUREMENTS

I measured a different sample of the Naim NAP 250, serial number 518784, than that auditioned by Martin Colloms. I performed the measurements with my Audio Precision SYS2722 system[1] after preconditioning the amplifier by following the CEA's recommendation of running it at one-eighth the specified power into 8 ohms for 30 minutes. At the end of that time, the cooling fan on the rear panel had turned on but the sidemounted heatsinks were very hot, at 127.1°F (52.9°C), and the top panel was only slightly cooler, at 116.4°F (46.9°C).

The Naim NAP 250 preserved absolute polarity, ie, was noninverting, and its voltage gain at 1kHz into 8 ohms was close to the specified 29dB, at 28.6dB. The Naim's balanced input impedance is specified as 47k ohms. I measured 47k ohms at 20Hz and 1kHz, but 24.4k ohms at 20kHz.

The NAP 250's output impedance at low and middle frequencies was 0.31 ohms, rising slightly to 0.33 ohm at the top of the audioband. The amplifier offered a wide small-signal bandwidth into resistive loads, the output at 100kHz into 8 ohms lying at –1dB (fig.1, blue and red traces). Into our standard simulated loudspeaker,[2] the variation in response in the audioband, due to the Ohm's law interaction between the amplifier's source impedance and the

1 See stereophile.com/content/measurements-maps-precision.

2 See stereophile.com/content/real-life-measurements-page-2.

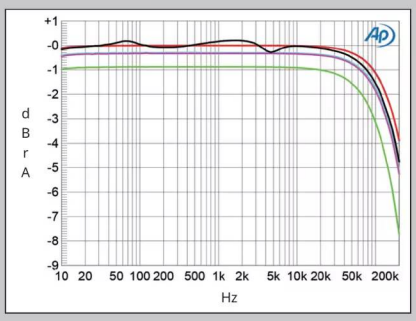

Fig.1 Naim NAP 250, frequency response at 2.83V into: simulated loudspeaker load (gray), 8 ohms (left channel blue, right red), 4 ohms (left cyan, right magenta), and 2 ohms (green) (2dB/vertical div.).

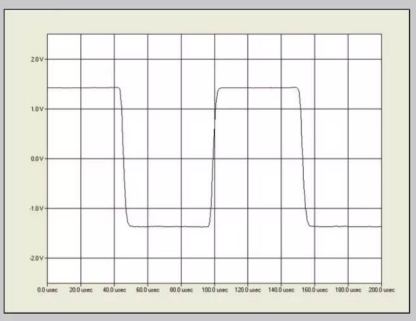

Fig.2 Naim NAP 250, small-signal 10kHz squarewave into 8 ohms.

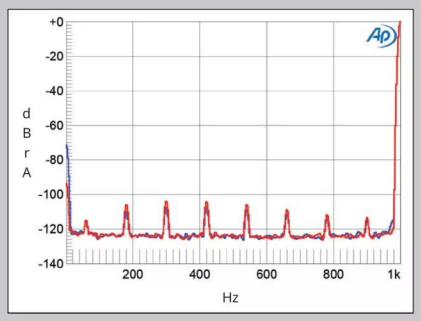

Fig.3 Naim NAP 250, spectrum of 1kHz sinewave, DC–1kHz, at 1W into 8 ohms (left channel blue, right red; linear frequency scale).

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chassis-plate region between the + and – connectors. In Naim amplifiers, this minor issue is nulled by introducing a small horizontal "insulating" slot between the standard Naim connectors at the standard 19mm spacing.

Performance upgrades include increased 8 ohm–rated power, now a full 100Wpc into 8 ohms with both channels driven, rated very conservatively at 0.1% THD+N. Rather more power is available for lower impedance loads. The amplifier is now rated at 190Wpc (at 1% THD+N) into 4 ohms with both channels driven. A 2 ohm "flat-out" toneburst rating of 300Wpc (up from 250Wpc) is consistent with the increase in peak current to a specified 28A. This increase in headroom promises better overall linearity.

Continuously working beyond the rated power will cause a low-noise cooling fan to turn on, after that a temporary thermal shutdown. (Naim calls the amplifier "party-proof.") Reset is automatic. The amplifier runs cool at modest power, barely warm to the touch and better for the environment.

Naim designer Steve Sells explained to me that in light of the prevalence of high-definition digital audio, the 250's bandwidth specification has been extended; the frequency response is now specified at 1.4Hz–100kHz, –3dB. The previous NAP 250 DR was rated at a much narrower 20Hz–20kHz but also with narrower limits: –0.5dB. The specified voltage gain is now 29dB, or a factor of about 30 times. The input sensitivity remains quite high at 1V for full-rated output, comparable with earlier Naim product ranges. This moderately high sensitivity—higher than most amplifiers from American designers—makes the NAP 250 a better match with direct-connected, volume-controlled DACs that output a nominal 2V full scale.

The new NAP 250 also enjoys a power supply redesign. The chunky, 1kVA-rated toroidal core transformer is continued, but regulation is improved, with lower copper losses (thicker wire!). Revised thermal annealing after assembly is said to lower internal stresses. Reservoir capacitors with a higher working voltage are fitted; this is well known to lift performance by helping to reduce artefacts that can occur in these internally complex, wound foil, passive components; pure capacitance they are not!

One thing that hasn't changed is the long-established, quasi-complementary, all-NPN transistor output topology. Circuit enhancements include liberal use of discrete, multiple-transistor constant-current stages with improved supply-rail noise rejection.

measurements, continued

impedance of the simulated speaker, was ±0.3dB (fig.1, gray trace). With its wide bandwidth, the Naim's reproduction of a 10kHz squarewave was superbly square, with no overshoot or ringing (fig.2).

The NAP 250's channel separation (not shown) was excellent in both directions, at >90dB below 2kHz, though it decreased to 70dB at 20kHz. The unweighted, wideband signal/noise ratio (ref. 1W into 8 ohms and measured with the input shorted to ground) was good, at 60.5dB (average of the two channels). This ratio improved to an excellent 89.4dB when the measurement bandwidth was restricted to 22Hz–22kHz, and to 92dB when A-weighted. Spectral analysis of the low-frequency noisefloor while the Naim amplifier drove a 1kHz tone at 1Wpc into 8 ohms (fig.3) revealed that AC-related spuriae were present at odd-order, integer multiples of the 60Hz AC frequency. These will be due to magnetic interference from the power supply transformer, but the spuriae are all very low in level, lying below –104dB ref. 1W into 8 ohms.

The NAP 250's output power is specified as 100Wpc into 8 ohms (20dBW) and 190Wpc into 4 ohms (19.3dBW).[3] With our usual definition of clipping as being when the THD+noise reaches 1%, I measured clipping powers with both channels

3 Naim specifies the NAP 250's clipping power into 8 ohms—100W—at 0.1% THD+N instead of the more common 1% THD+N. The amplifier meets that stricter specification.

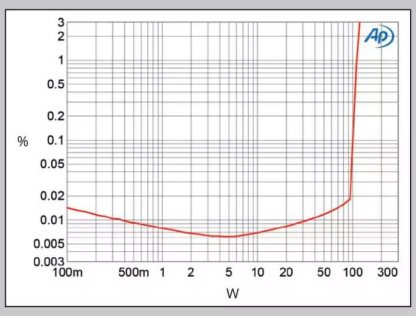

Fig.4 Naim NAP 250, distortion (%) vs 1kHz continuous output power into 8 ohms.

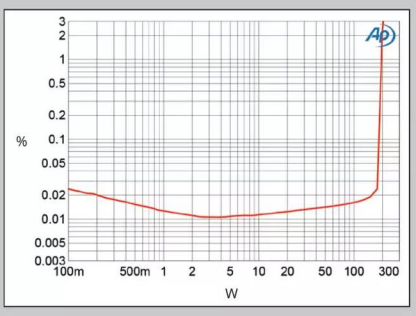

Fig.5 Naim NAP 250, distortion (%) vs 1kHz continuous output power into 4 ohms.

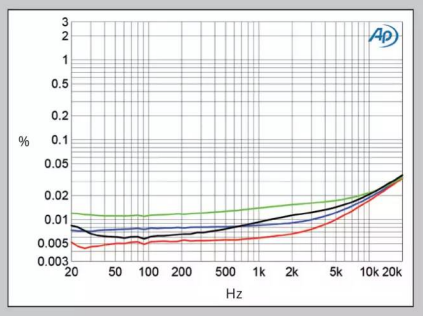

Fig.6 Naim NAP 250, THD+N (%) vs frequency at 12.67V into: 8 ohms (left channel blue, right red) and 4 ohms (left green, right gray).

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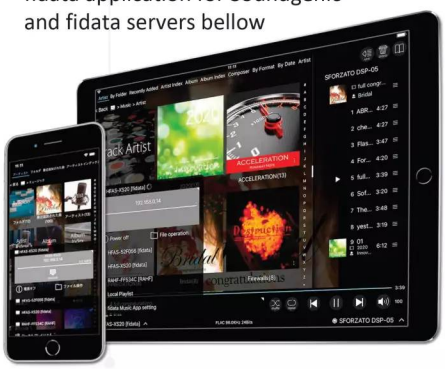

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The entire circuit board has been relaid for more logical signal paths. Superior, low-capacitance, thermally conductive aluminum-nitride heatsink insulators, previously used on the output transistors, are now also fitted to the regulators. Their lower capacitance should reduce stray coupling to the chassis. The time constant chosen for output-stage biasing has been lowered to the infrasonic, aiding low-frequency phase response. Full regulation of the supply rails has been retained.

Because the amplifier is now fully balanced, the input stage comprises two Naim input gain stages per channel. This format is claimed to deliver "an unexpected improvement in sound quality," which Naim says is supplemented by the accompanying redesign of the low-level, DR-stabilized supply rails. ("DR" stands for "discrete regulator"; regulation is not carried out by an IC chip.) Those low-noise "DR" regulators are also deployed for the subsidiary power supply rails and serve to reduce the noisefloor.

A retuning of the overall feedback/stability margin is claimed to contribute to better sound quality, augmented by greater output-current headroom, useful for driving lower-impedance loads down to a newly specified 2 ohms minimum impedance. Also worth noting is the retention of the traditional 60dB channel separation specification, constant over the full audio bandwidth. More separation is technically possible—but would it make the sound worse? Naim argues that it would.[2]

When installed in an all-Naim system—let us say with its partnering NSC 222 streaming preamplifier—the amplifier powers up silently in four stages. This process may be synchronized optically with the other matching audio units, avoiding unwanted noise from earth leakage currents. By this and other means, stray electrical noise is rendered inaudible.

The NAP 250 sounds pretty good quite soon after powering up. A soft-start power-breaker module derived from the Statement design helps reduce stress on the mains input fuse. An auxiliary power supply initiates startup then shuts down once the amp is fully powered. Under normal use, the heatsink fins flanking the case will silently cool the amplifier, but if it is driven unduly hard or at high ambient temperatures, a low-noise, variable-speed cooling fan starts up. To meet global efficiency regulations, standby is invoked if the NAP 250 is silent for more than 20 minutes.

Fully regulated power supplies tend to give the subjective impression of significantly more power, for example, with the bass sounding as if the power transformer and reservoir are considerably larger than the ones fitted. Frequently there are performance gains in other areas such as transparency and micro detail, but when judged subjectively, supply regulation is still not a completely convincing substitute for more power, such as one with a massive 3–4kVA transformer having typically 300,000µF of reservoir capacitance. The difference becomes evident when driving larger speakers capable of extended low frequency at high power, frequently with a taxing, low-impedance loading. With their ultra-heavy loading, such speakers can often reveal the amplifier power supply's character in the resulting sound quality, even though most amplifiers are designed to avoid this unwelcome association by using negative feedback to maintain a low output impedance and thus to better meet the reactive current demand.

Sound quality

For this assessment, the 200-system electronics perched on a four-tier, vibration-controlling Naim FRAIM rack. Standard NAC A5 speaker cables were used, among others (see the Associated Equipment sidebar), along with Naim Powerline Lite power cables,

2 JA's measurements found that the NAP 250 easily exceeded this specification, but channel separation was not constant over the audible bandwidth. See the Measurements sidebar.—**Jim Austin**

measurements, continued

driven of 110Wpc into 8 ohms (20.4dBW, fig.4) and 195Wpc into 4 ohms (19.9dBW, fig.5). Fig.6 shows how the percentage of THD+noise varies with frequency into 8 and 4 ohms at 12.67V (equivalent to 20W into 8 ohms and 40W into 4 ohms). The distortion into both impedances was extremely low in the bass and midrange, but rose a little in the treble. The level of the distortion was also a little higher in the left channel (blue and green traces) than the right (red and gray traces).

The THD+N waveform (fig.7, bottom trace) is dominated by the second harmonic, though there is a hint of crossover distortion. Spectral analysis (fig.8) confirmed that the second harmonic was the highest in level, but even at 40Wpc into 4 ohms, it lay at just –86dB in the right channel (red trace) and –80dB in the left channel (blue trace). However, this graph indicates that higher-order harmonics are also present, albeit at even lower levels. With the NAP 250 driving an equal mix of 19 and 20kHz tones at 40Wpc peak into 4 ohms (fig.9), the 1kHz difference product lay at –80dB (0.01%), with the higher-order products at 18 and 21kHz almost 10dB lower in level.

Naim's NAP 250 offers relatively high power with low noise and very low, predominantly second-harmonic distortion in a modest-sized chassis. But it needs to be well ventilated.—**John Atkinson**

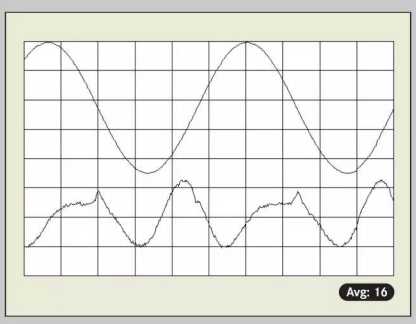

Fig.7 Naim NAP 250, left channel, 1kHz waveform at 20W into 8 ohms, 0.0077% THD+N (top); distortion and noise waveform with fundamental notched out (bottom, not to scale).

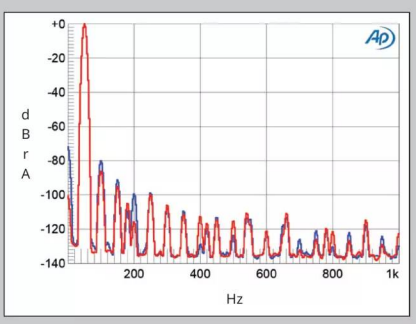

Fig.8 Naim NAP 250, spectrum of 50Hz sinewave, DC–1kHz, at 40Wpc into 4 ohms (left channel blue, right red; linear frequency scale).

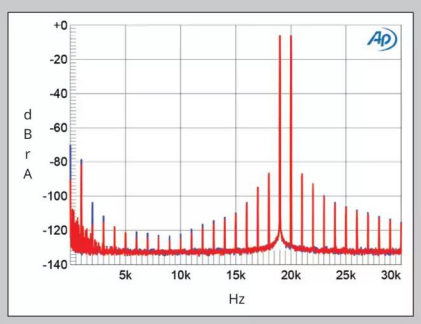

Fig.9 Naim NAP 250, HF intermodulation spectrum, DC–30kHz, 19+20kHz at 40Wpc peak into 4 ohms (left channel blue, right red; linear frequency scale).

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standard Naim interconnect cables, and on occasion, the Super Lumina alternatives. Power was supplied via dedicated low-noise, audio-specific spurs from an incoming mains connection for audio, hardwired to an exclusive breaker box.

The music source was the reference-level, "fully loaded" Naim ND 555 streamer powered by dual 555 PS DR supplies. Preamplification and volume-adjustment duties were carried out by the Townshend Allegri Reference passive control. My more recent experience is that running in Naim electronics is less prolonged than it used to be, perhaps due to a reduced reliance on tantalum capacitors. Previously, that final finesse seemed to crystallize only over some months of use. A few weeks of use was enough for the new 250 to largely settle down—but then it already had been out on loan for a month or two before reaching me.

Beginning with an ear to the loudspeaker, program absent, the powered system was absolutely silent—a good sign. Noise is always

THE ODD ONE OUT? (CABLES AND CONNECTIONS)

Ever since the company began trading in the early 1970s, Naim has embraced certain core engineering values. For good or ill, these have significantly differentiated their product line from the mainstream. Importantly, some of their connector choices have deviated from established hi-fi–industry practice.

Such ostensibly awkward decisions were not made on whims or merely to be exclusive. Take Naim's well-researched, early choice of the DIN specification, often combined with proprietary connection topologies and cable assemblies, which made their products less accessible and less compatible with the broader audio market. Naim products were best used in an all-Naim system.

Another, supposedly superior alternative was the use of cables with XLR connectors, which were (and continue to be) widely used by broadcast and recording studios, ubiquitous on microphone feeds and common in other interconnection contexts. These interconnections generally use a balanced, two-phase signal in a configuration capable of canceling "common-mode" interference. In a pro-audio context, reliability, hum and noise rejection, and vibration-tolerant connections are highly valued, indeed essential—but isn't this just what we want for high-quality home-audio connections?

Naim chose its less-common connectors for a reason. These connector designs made it easier for the equipment designer and installer to unambiguously configure the audio chain (ensuring, for example, that the stereo channels were wired in the correct left-right orientation and correct phase) and offered superior electrical and mechanical integrity. Furthermore, they conferred greater immunity to vibration. The classic European 5-pin and 8-pin DIN signal connectors locked reliably, mitigated vibration effects, and massively increased connection reliability.

Naim connectors provided some protection from potentially system-damaging disconnection faults. I vividly remember such a disaster from several decades ago, when I was rudely awoken in the dead of night by a faulty ground connection. With a terrifying roar, a pair of Wilson WATT-Puppy bass drivers crashed and burned in under a minute when a lightly tensioned RCA plug parted with its connector and drove a monoblock power amplifier to way above clipping. This would not have happened with DIN- or XLR-terminated cables, with their built-in locking facility.

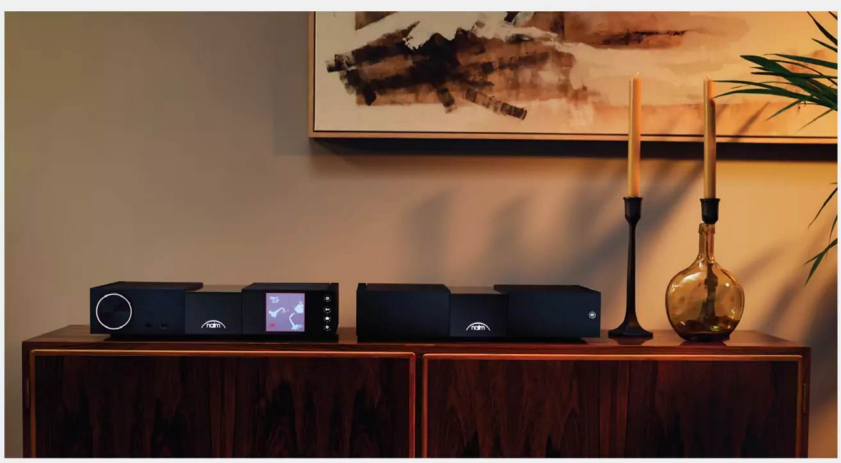
Naim also defined a systematic grounding practice for an audio system, avoiding the ambiguity often encountered with multiple grounds and the consequent, uncertain results prevalent especially with low-output phono cartridges. With a single, hierarchical ground connection in an interconnected array of products, hum- and noise-inducing ground loops could be avoided. You may get away without such exacting ground practice; even so, following it improves sound quality by subtly lowering the noisefloor. These high-contact-force, vibration-resistant, low-impedance connectors also reduce the potential for harmonic distortion arising at contact interfaces.

Naim was not seeking to impose this offbeat connector practice just to be different or to sell more proprietary cables. Rather, they created a more reliable cable and connector environment where the sound quality of their audio systems could flourish. They supported and marketed these concepts through persuasive demonstrations of sound quality. The foundation of all this was extensive, self-critical listening tests of every part in the chain.

All along, Naim has been conscious of market pressures to increase compatibility with mainstream products without conceding the performance gains realized by its idiosyncratic practice. This led to some connectivity changes, many of which are expressed in the new 200 series. On the back panel of the new NAP 250, you'll find two conventional, balanced left and right XLR input connectors in place of the single, proprietary two-channel XLR connector found on the previous 250 DR.

The new NSC 222 streamer-preamplifier's phono input has the usual terminal for turntable ground. (Yes, it includes a phono stage.) Phono cartridges have small output signals, some very small, which render them, their cables, and connectors susceptible to contamination by mains-frequency hum. Naim has applied hierarchical grounding to connected audio systems. The NSC 222 (and also the ND 555 streamer/DAC employed in this review) has selectable grounding; you can choose the 222 as the "primary source" ground connection or, alternatively, set it to "float" via a switch on the rear panel. The result of floating the ground is to assign the primary ground to the turntable.

Such setup niceties will be explored in the second review tranche covering the NSC 222 preamplifier-streamer, augmented by that additional matching power supply, the NPX 300.—**Martin Colloms**



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a critical issue. Even when present at very low levels, I find that it may subtly alter perception.

I rate the previous Naim NAP 250 model—the outgoing 250 DR—highly. I bought one, retail, from a dealer. But I was shocked and even confused by the latest iteration. This was so obviously a new sound, fresh and open, clear and transparent, in the low bass and the upper frequencies.

I had already put about some hours on the NAP 250 when I assembled my classic, decades-experienced, expert listening companions: Chris Bryant, Tony Faulkner, and Jon Honeyball. Their scoreboards were at the ready to record their opinions and ratings. At times, we returned to my extant 250 DR to observe the differences more clearly. We all individually and silently determined that the new NAP 250 offers a substantial improvement over its predecessor in numerous sound-quality dimensions.

To further this evaluation, I needed a clearer view of how the new power amplifier operated in a familiar system, here driven via my well-validated Townshend Allegri Reference auto-transformer control, which is single-ended internally but includes a pair of XLR-terminated inputs and outputs. Steve Reich was up first, with *Sextet, Music for Mallet Instruments* (CD, RCA 979138-21985), which I have played so many times that I feel certain I can recall every note and nuance of timbre, every potential soundstage dimension, its mesmeric drive, and all those intricate, kaleidoscopic details. I always hope new equipment might reveal additional detail, and this was the case with the Naim NAP 250. Compared with previous sessions, there was now an extra clarity to the soundstage, increased depth and width, but also a sense of enhanced spatiality where the xylophones and pianos shimmered and sang while those periodic, timing drumbeats were perfectly placed in the middle distance. The virtual soundstage was significantly enlarged, with more stability and solidity and crisper focus than before. There were also obvious gains in ambience and image depth.

In complete contrast, Joni Mitchell's "Blue," from the LP of the same name (WE A UK K441128), was rendered with that delicately subtle, introspective, gently rocking timing, plus a winning degree of intimacy, which drew in my listeners. Conversely, the densely scored opening track from Philip Glass's *Koyaanisqatsi* (CD rip to WAV, Nonesuch 7559-79506-2), served up from my Naim Unitiserve via the Roon Nucleus+, the Roon Core server, needs to sound majestic, spacious, and powerful, ideally with the electronics digging deep for subtle detail frequently hidden in the dense scoring. Sailing through this track, the pipe organ thundered appropriately in the low bass, yet the soundstage remained clear and spacious in the upper ranges. I have heard good power amplifiers at several times the cost which have offered a less convincing musical performance on this track. Sorry to say, it was also convincingly better than my own 250 DR.

I would describe the overall timbre as neutral, neither dim nor bright, the texture very fine grained, with an unusually clear-sighted transparency which enabled particularly deep and detailed soundstages. Jan Garbarek's "Evenly They Danced," from *Rites* (CD rip to WAV, ECM 1685/86, same delivery route as above), was entrancing, with a delicately nuanced and sparkling treble, and the eponymous opening track exhibited the correct degree of gloomy cavernous space, reaching back into a seemingly sonic darkness, accompanied by a stark, pounding beat in the low bass. On lesser amplifiers that particular percussive quality of this percussion section is frequently diluted, but not in this case.

I am fond of my extant NAP 250 DR, and in standalone mode it remains a great power amplifier with well-benchmarked qualities of fine timing, bass tune playing, solid rhythms, and spacious, well-focused stereo images, but this new version has certainly moved the goal posts. For the new version I am now reaching the 35-hour listening mark and my enthusiasm is undiminished, particularly for its recreation of a highly charged sense of spatial envelopment.

Not wishing to preempt the next tranche of this 200-series Naim system review, I will nonetheless advise that this new power amplifier slotted into its place in the 200-system rack, with the streamer-pre and auxiliary supply, and was found to behave perfectly in situ. Highly transparent, it illustrated those fine differences between a panoply of connection modes, interconnect cables, and Balanced and SE operation. Likewise, a carefully configured and fine-sounding online streaming connection was clearly bested by files from a local hard drive source, served up by Roon—such is the analytical quality of this new power amplifier.

General observations included the sensation of deeper bass, which sounded like a half-octave extension. A 33Hz organ pedal note that previously was mildly audible was now rendered firmly with an appropriate growling texture. It played louder without fatigue. It rocked on jazz and rock and seduced with classical.

Replaying the Decca recording of "Summer" from Vivaldi's *The Four Seasons* with Alan Loveday, Neville Marriner, and the Academy of St. Martin in the Fields (LP, Argo ZRG 654), I was transported to my historic review experience with the Goldmund Reference turntable (in *The Absolute Sound*, 1988). This recording figured strongly in that project, helping to chart the complex setup and calibration sessions to a final point of excellence.[3] Languid, flowing, shimmering with detail, and near mesmeric, the new Naim produced a captivating replay.

For rock, I turned to Sting on LP, *Ghost in the Machine*, playing "Spirits in the Material World." This sounded as punchy and connected as I have yet heard, upbeat and rocking, with that characteristic crisp clarity and engaging dynamics. It did not need to be played loud to be engaging.

Conclusions

The NAP 250 stereo power amplifier proved to be easy to install and drive. It is loudspeaker-load tolerant and offers unusually high electrical efficiency. To the surprise and delight of all who experienced it, the sound quality was remarkably improved in every parameter. It is undoubtedly a front-line performer. ■

ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT

Digital sources Naim UnitiCore network, Roon Nucleus+ servers; Naim ND555 Streamer-DAC with 555 DR power supplies.
Analog sources Linn LP12 turntable with Keel chassis, Karousel main bearing, Radikal motor control, and Naim ARO tonearm. Naim SuperLine-SuperCap DR phono preamplifier. Lyra Delos and Hana MH cartridges.
Preamplification Townshend Allegri Reference control unit, Naim NSC 222.
Power amplifiers Naim NAP 250 DR power amplifier, D'Agostino Progression 350 stereo power amplifier.
Loudspeakers Magico A5, FinkTeam KIM, BBC LS3/5a.
Cables Interconnects: Naim Standard and Super Lumina, Transparent MM2, and Van den Hul Carbon TFU. Loudspeaker: Transparent XL MM2 and Naim NAC A5. Power: Transparent XL series and Naim Powerline and Powerline Lite.
Accessories 4-tier Naim FRAIM racks.—**Martin Colloms**

3 The report Martin is describing, which does not seem to be online, appeared in Vol.13 No.51 of *The Absolute Sound*. "At that time, Decca a short walk away, lent me a 38ips copy master [tape] of the Vivaldi," for comparison to the LP version played back on the Goldmund Reference, he told me in an email. Martin also said that for the current review, he listened to the very same copy that he listened to back then, on a Linn LP 12, his reference record player in 1988, when he carried out this Goldmund review.—**Jim Austin**

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JASON VICTOR SERINUS

Wilson Audio Specialties LōKē

SUBWOOFER

Piece of cake, thought I. All I needed to do to review Wilson Audio Specialties' smallest active subwoofer, the LōKē ($8950 each in standard finish), was describe how low a pair goes in my room and how cleanly they woof.

As I was soon to learn, though, there was a lot more to reviewing LōKēs than that. Why? Because a pair of LōKē subwoofers does more than reinforce the already deep bass extension[1] of the Wilson Alexia V loudspeakers with which they are now paired in my system. Therein lies the tale.

Behind the woof

"Wilson Audio has a long history with subwoofers," Wilson CEO Daryl Wilson[2] explained during a Zoom conversation that also included Blake Schmutz, director of the Wilson Audio Special Ap-

1 Wilson Audio measures the Alexia V's frequency range as 19Hz–33kHz ±3dB Room Average Response (RAR).

2 When we spoke, Wilson Audio was gearing up to launch its new active Submerge and passive Subsonic subwoofers, revisions to its Mezzo center channel and Alida wall-mount/surround/Atmos speakers, and several Special Applications Engineering offerings.

SPECIFICATIONS

Description Floorstanding active subwoofer with 10" woofer and 500W class-D internal amplification. Frequency response: 20Hz–250Hz (±1dB). Effective piston area: 21.75in². Effective displacement: 33.42in³. Input sensitivity (L+R) RCA, input level switch set to Normal: 310mV RMS; RCA, input switch set to Hi: 620mV RMS. XLR, input level switch set to Normal: 630mV RMS; XLR, input level switch set to Hi: 1.25V RMS. Maximum input level (L+R): RCA, input switch set to Normal: 1.1V RMS; RCA, input switch set to Hi: 2.3V RMS; XLR, input level switch set to Normal: 2.4V RMS; XLR, input level switch set to Hi: 4.6V RMS. Input impedance: RCA inputs: 10k ohms; XLR inputs: 20k ohms. Gain (100Hz @ 1W output): 43.3dB with input switch set to Normal, 37.2dB with input switch set to Hi. Input saturation level, RCA and XLR: >2V with input switch set to Hi. S/N ratio at max volume, A-weighted: 98.4dB. THD+N, 20Hz–20kHz at full rated Power @ 100Hz: <1%. Frequency response, 20–250Hz, ±1dB. Output power (4 ohms) at –10dBV (L+R): 500W. Auto On sensitivity: 3mV. Auto Off time: 20 mins. Time delay: 2ms.
Dimensions 20 3/4" (527mm) H × 13 7/8" (352mm) W × 21 3/4" (552mm) D. Weight: 110lb (49.9kg).
Finish Five standard options, Galaxy Gray, GT Silver, Quartz, Carbon, Medio Grigo, plus two dozen "Upgrade" and "Premium" finishes.
Serial numbers of units reviewed 169, 170. Manufactured in USA.
Base price $8950 in standard finish; $9450 in the review pair's Cobalt Blue Satin, an "Upgrade" finish.
Approximate number of North American dealers 33.
Warranty: 5 years with registration.
Manufacturer
Wilson Audio Specialties,
2233 Mountain Vista Ln.,
Provo, UT 84606.
Tel: (801) 377-2233.
Web: wilsonaudio.com.

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plications Engineering (WASAE) division.[3]

"If you go back to our original WAMM, which was low frequency limited, my father complemented it with two large woofer towers. Then, later, for people with space issues, he released the passive WHOW [Wilson High-Output Woofer] as an option. After that came the active POW WHOW, with a built-in amplifier. Fast-forward 15 years, to right after the X-1 Grand SLAMM was introduced, when my father asked Chief Engineer Vern Credille[4] to create the huge XS,[5] the ultimate subwoofer for home theater."

Since peaking in size with the XS, Wilson subs have gotten smaller and smaller, responding to dealer and consumer demands. When Wilson employees added their voices, expressing a desire for an even smaller subwoofer for their own setups that was reasonably priced by Wilson standards, the LōKĒ was born.

As with other Wilson products (including the aforementioned XS), "LōKĒ" has several meanings. In Norse mythology, LōKĒ is the mischievous little brother of the great god Thor, for whom the much larger Thor's Hammer is named. So "LōKĒ" seemed appropriate for Thor's diminutive sibling. But in the world of puns that, for better or worse, spins circles around Wilson's CEOs and associates, present and former, Daryl indicated that LōKĒ also signifies that the company's smallest subwoofer is intended "to hit low keys while kind of hiding, 'low key,' in the corner."

LōKĒ was conceived of to pair with Wilson's smaller loudspeakers and other speakers of similar size. Its 10" woofer, housed in a relatively small enclosure, was never intended to put out huge home-theater SPLs or to descend to 5Hz. Depending on the room, LōKĒ could put out "some decent SPL" down to 20Hz, Daryl told me. In my 20' L × 16' W × 9'4" H listening room, Daryl thought it would deliver energy to "well below 20Hz."

Daryl and Blake classify LōKĒ as a WASAE product, as in Blake's title (see above). A WASAE product is one that does not fit Wilson's

3 In this review, to make it clear when I'm referring to Daryl Wilson rather than the company, I'll call him Daryl. For consistency, I shall refer to all Wilson personnel by their first names.

4 Vern has worked at Wilson Audio for 30 years and is frequently credited for his work on drivers and crossovers.

5 Wilson insists that XS was a phonetic play on the word "excess," and I believe them, but I can't look at those two letters together without thinking, with irony, of "Extra Small." The XS, which was retired in 2005, weighed 750lb.—**Jim Austin**

MEASUREMENTS

Although the LōKĒ was reviewed by JVS in a system with the Wilson Alexia V loudspeakers, I measured it in a different context, paired up with the Wilson SabrinaX. As noted in the review in *Hi-Fi News* (December 2022), the scope of the LōKĒ's low-pass (LPF) and subsonic (HPF) frequency and slope options plus phase, output level, parametric EQ, and placement scenarios allows many response combinations. For the sake of expediency, I left the subsonic (HPF) and PEQ features disabled for the flattest LF response and focused on the tunable (30Hz–125Hz, ±1Hz) LPF options. The Sabrina's port has a 27Hz–85Hz range, supporting the 60Hz–280Hz passband of the Sabrina's woofer (all limits –6dB), realizing a 52Hz bass extension (–6dB ref. 200Hz) despite a steep LF roll-off (dashed trace, fig.2). When optimally integrated with the LōKĒ using a 60Hz LPF and 12dB/octave slope (black trace, fig.2), the diffraction-corrected system response extends to a rib-tickling 17Hz. The impact of higher and lower LPF frequencies (80Hz, blue; 40Hz, red, fig.2) is shown. The residual notch at ~50Hz may be fine-tuned by boundary placement and the LōKĒ's output via its Phase Degree facility.

In common with most modern DSP-governed subs, the LōKĒ is very versatile. Increasing the LPF frequency from 40Hz in steps up to 125Hz results in a shift in the LōKĒ's passband from 19Hz–98Hz to 42Hz–120Hz (all ref. –6dB). These ranges are not significantly influenced by the choice of roll-off slope (solid traces, fig.1). The long slot port is tuned to 22Hz with an effective 13Hz–134Hz (–6dB) output when the LPF is set to its maximum (125Hz, dashed traces, fig.1). The peak at 111Hz just before a steep roll-off is tamed when the LPF is set to 80Hz or lower (dashed blue trace). Ultimate bass extension is influenced by boundary reinforcement and the LPF (and subsonic HPF if applied), but useful output below 15Hz (–6dB ref. 100Hz) is perfectly achievable. There is some small penalty in second harmonic distortion below 60Hz, however, where levels increase from ~0.1% to ~0.9% at 50Hz and ~9% at 40Hz (measured at 90dB spl).—**Paul Miller**

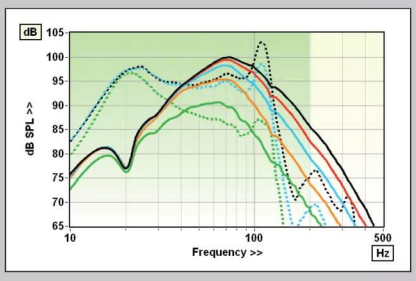

Fig.1 Nearfield driver (solid) & port (dashed) response for the LōKĒ with LPF set to 120Hz black, 100Hz red, 80Hz blue, 60Hz orange, and 40Hz green. All slopes 12dB/oct.

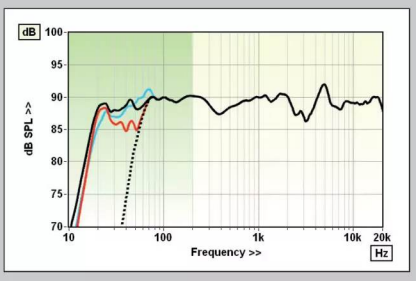

Fig.2 SabrinaX/LōKĒ response incl. nearfield summed bass (80Hz LPF, blue; 60Hz, black; 40Hz, red) freefield corrected to 1m at 2.83V. Dashed line is w/o the LōKĒ sub.

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"standard" loudspeaker model. Why? First off, the LōKē differs from other Wilson subs because it has limited output power that is sufficient only for smaller spaces.

It's an outlier in another way as well. In designing the LōKē, Wilson was able to make only certain modifications to its outsourced amplifier. "We were able to make some changes to the amplifier, but change requests were limited by the manufacturer," Blake said. "We didn't have the ability to do everything we may have wanted. We could have spent a couple of hundred thousand dollars developing an amplifier that was customized just for Wilson Audio, but that didn't make sense when we were able to find an amplifier that checked all the boxes ... after some relatively minor modifications." That said amplifier is built by a US company—Dayton Audio—that builds its products in Taiwan was an additional enticement.

Wilson also chose to work with Dayton because their amplifier, according to Daryl, is "virtually bulletproof." "These units have a 98% reliability rate," Blake noted. And if an amplifier *were* to fail, Daryl noted, the electronics are easily serviceable.

Subwoofers are often called on to extend the bass of a smaller "satellite" speaker. The LōKē can do that when paired with a TuneTot or any other limited-bandwidth speaker. But all of Wilson's larger speakers, from SabrinaX up, run full range or close to it; used with size-appropriate mates, including the Alexia V, the LōKē can reinforce low bass.

Low bass is LōKē's raison d'être. "In my large room, we cross over our subs at 44Hz," Daryl said. "We don't ask them to produce sweetness in the midrange or harmonic expression in the high frequencies. We ask them to push air very effectively."

Even so, integration with the main loudspeakers is very important. Integration means several things. It means getting the subwoofer volume right. It means making sure music signals at every frequency in the range where main speakers and subs overlap arrive at the listener's ears at the same time. And it means, according to Daryl, that it has to be fast. "If a subwoofer can't integrate well into a system and contribute to the reproduction of music in a believable way, it won't have any Wilson or WASAE badging on it," he said. "A sub has to be fast and create the space in the music in a believable way. If it can recreate large spaces such as the Concertgebouw or the Musikverein, and accurately convey the thud of the timpani or the roll of the drum on the skin, then it will take care of anything that is thrown at it."

When I asked what Wilson had done to ensure smooth integration with the main speakers and avoid bloated bass, it was Blake who answered. "We examined resonance control and were very careful about our driver selection. To avoid the muddy feel, the woofer has to be nimble, move fast, and recover quickly."

What does it mean for a subwoofer to be fast? The answer to this question came from Vern, via Blake: "If we put energy into a driver that is below its natural mass-controlled region, we see a 'quickness' in the subwoofer bandwidth."

Addressing the cabinet, Blake said, "You can also get a lot of smearing if the baffle is modulating. You've got a lot of mass in a subwoofer, so the enclosure has to be heroic. This is where our X-material shines. If you're trying to save on material cost and skate the line between good enough and just good enough, you do detriment to the design. X-material enables the enclosure to be rigid, stiff, and able to handle the pressures created by the woofer without contributing its own resonances to the sound." That curve on LōKē's side isn't just cosmetic; the material is thicker in that region to help dampen the enclosure and provide additional rigidity.

The LōKē's amplifier includes controls that allow listeners to delay the signal and correct for distance discrepancies between the main speakers and the LōKē so that launch and wavefronts reach the listener simultaneously. "When they do, everything synchs up and the subwoofers disappear," Daryl said.

Phase, space

According to Wilson Brand Ambassador Peter McGrath, who journeyed to Port Townsend with his wife, Elizabeth, to set up a review pair of LōKēs, "Wilson always constructs and sizes its subwoofer enclosures to allow the driver or drivers to operate at a natural Q, ie, to operate in a linear fashion throughout its range." "Q" is Quality Factor, a measure of the width of any resonance. JA often mentions it in his loudspeaker measurements. "Natural Q" means doing what most loudspeaker designers would do: put an appropriate, high-quality driver in a well-designed enclosure. That may not sound especially fancy. However: "From the time of Bob Carver on," Peter continued, "people have forced subwoofer drivers to do a lot of unnatural things by putting them into enclosures that typically do not allow for natural Q and then applying high levels of power and equalizing the signal. But whenever you apply equalization in the analog world, you shift the time domain of the driver." Frequency-dependent phase shift. Avoiding that is what Peter means when he says "operate in a linear fashion throughout its range."[6]

There's another factor at work here. Like some but not all other subwoofers, the LōKē digitizes the incoming signal. In the digital

6 In a follow-up email, Chief Engineer Vern Credille elaborated. "When a subwoofer is designed appropriately, with sufficient volume in the box for the driver, there is no need to manipulate the driver's acoustical or electroacoustical behavior with an EQ or other means. There is a common trend to have large drivers in small boxes, where an EQ is required to manipulate the throw of the driver to maintain pressure inside the box, which results in phase anomalies in the selected bandwidth of the subwoofer. In the LōKē, because the box was designed for the driver, the phase characteristics in the subwoofer bandwidth are linear."

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realm, you can manipulate the signal with less impact on phase than is possible in the analog realm.

"When you add a subwoofer to a musical system, as when you add a LŌKĒ to an Alexia V, Sasha V, or Sabrina, you're working with a speaker that already has extended low frequency response," Peter said. "That results in an overlap between the output of the subwoofer and the output of the main speaker. The subwoofer and speaker must remain in exactly the same phase during the overlap to make the main speaker seem to descend even lower naturally while avoiding the introduction of such bass anomalies as a slightly blurred sound or a subwoofer that sounds like a subwoofer rather than naturally blending. When that goal is achieved, you not only gain bass; you also gain space."

Gain space? That's a claim I'd heard Peter and other Wilson reps make during demos of speaker-sub combinations. Every time I listened, space depiction and air seemed natural. But that didn't mean that the subwoofer was responsible for some of the realistic air I heard. The only way to tell for certain was to turn the subwoofers off and on and listen for myself. Until I was able to experience the difference, I greeted this claim with a healthy dose of skepticism.

Peter was not able to supply a definitive reason why subwoofers increase air. I don't know if anyone can. "My belief is that it's because you've got another pair of drivers in a different position that allows them to get past and break up some of the locked-in room modes that are characteristic of every room," he surmised. "In the digital recordings I make, bass descends to 3 or 4Hz because that's what the microphones I use are capable of capturing. You don't hear that subharmonic low bass, but you can sense it. You normally don't miss this information until you have a subwoofer that can supply a sense of its presence in the room.

"When I apply Wilson subwoofers to studio recordings of pop music, you also get an additional sense of space. Perhaps the phenomenon is connected to breaking up room mode anomalies and making the bass more evenly distributed in the room. Whatever the cause, a very good subwoofer design with natural Q, properly implemented and applied to a natural-sounding full-range loudspeaker, will result in a significantly improved sense of air and reality."

Are two subwoofers necessary to achieve this effect? "A more dimensional re-creation of space is possible when two subs are used in an audio system that sends the left channel LF information to the left sub and right channel LF information to the right sub," Daryl said, but one sub may suffice if left- and right-channel LF information are summed, as in the LFE (low frequency effect) audio tracks transmitted via Dolby, DTS, and other home theater sonic schemes.[7]

Features, setup, and phase

Rather than repeating every feature and setup parameter detailed in the LŌKĒ's online manual,[8] I'll highlight those I found most important. But first this: While it's true that placing LŌKĒs near room boundaries and corners provides even more bass reinforcement, care must be taken to avoid introducing upper-bass colorations caused by overloading upper-bass room modes.

Subwoofers come, broadly, in two varieties: those that operate entirely in the analog realm and those that digitize the music. The LŌKĒ is in the latter category.[9] Controls on LŌKĒ's rear amplifier panel include an input-level switch, a power-mode switch, a Feature Setup knob, and a main power switch. The input-level switch lets you choose between Normal and Hi-Level, which attenuates input signals by –6dB. The power-mode switch lets you choose between On and Auto; the latter setting puts the amplifier into standby after 20 minutes without an input signal. The clickable Feature Setup knob lets you adjust the LŌKĒ's many DSP features, and a small LCD display facilitates setup. The panel also features balanced and unbalanced analog inputs and (line-level) outputs, an IEC connector, and a USB control connector.

The DSP settings accessible via the Feature Setup knob include volume; high-pass,[10] low-pass, and subsonic filters; a two-band parametric equalizer; and phase (0–180°). Each LŌKĒ comes with a standard power cable, spikes, Wilson's Acoustic Diodes, and various installation tools.

Wilson recommends placing a pair of LŌKĒs on the same arc as the front baffles of the main speakers—the same distance from the listening position—but the only space available in my room was near the sidewalls a bit ahead of the Alexia Vs. Peter did the installation. I missed some of it—fish gotta swim, birds gotta fly, dogs must be walked or there's mud in my eye—but I was present to

7 I would add "or more," as in "two or more," because when it comes to subwoofers, there's nothing special about the number two. At the frequency ranges we're discussing (~40Hz and below), sound isn't directional, so as long as you can adjust the phase so that the music from the subs arrives at your ears at the same time as the music from the main speakers, you can use as many as you like and put them wherever they work best. More subwoofers is better because, first, you reduce the demands on each one (an excess of which could result in audible distortion), and second, with more units, you have more options for energizing the room.—**Jim Austin**

8 See wilsonaudio.com/media/1299/LoKe-Owners-Manual.pdf.

9 Music passing through from input to output presumably remains in the analog realm, but the music that finds its way to the LŌKĒ's 10" woofer is digitized.—**Jim Austin**

10 The high-pass filter affects only the line-level output.

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provide feedback, turn knobs, and hold the 110lb subs steady as Peter adjusted the Acoustic Diode supports and leveled the LōKēs.

Before the dogs and I took our stroll, I asked Peter if he could set the crossover point high enough to enable the LōKēs to compensate for the bass dip in my room that begins around 63Hz. When he tried, he could not make the subwoofers disappear. No doubt the bass sounded egregiously overemphasized and generally out of whack. Eventually, he settled on a crossover point of 38Hz.

In dialing in the phase, Peter listened for maximum amplitude; his goal was to ensure that music from the subs and the main speakers arrived at the listening position at the same moment. "You can feather the phase one way or the other to get the LōKē to sing with the main speaker," Peter said. "It's hard to describe what I'm looking for at 40Hz, but it's like when you're on a boat that has two engines and you throttle the engines, you can hear this sort of synchronous 'bing' when the two engines lock in and become precisely one pitch. If you vary the rpm by as little as 25 one way or the other, they no longer do that. That's what I'm looking for in the woofer. If you listen carefully, you can almost hear where the two drivers seem to be locked in. But first, you must have all the other basic parameters set, including the amplitude and volume. If one is too loud, the phase won't lock in properly. But when they're matched correctly and the crossover frequency has been set, phase is the final adjustment."

The cable and power conundrum

Are premium power cables and interconnects advantageous with subwoofers? "Good design should reward the listener the more they put into it," said Daryl, who uses Shunyata power cables and a Shunyata conditioner with the subwoofers in his own system. He cautioned, though, that results will depend on a host of factors. "If the room is clean, you have room treatment, and the setup is ideal, you will hear cable differences more readily. But this is a product that you may need to squeeze into a corner behind plants or under a desk. Even with standard power cords, you'll hear an immediate improvement. But good power cables can reduce any kind of potential hum. The cleaner the power, the cleaner the LōKēs will sound."

Peter added, "Using the LōKēs with their supplied power cables and nominal balanced interconnects"—that would include the pair of Mogami 2534 XLR cables my friend Peter Schwartzman loaned me for the installation—"will suffice to show what the woofers can add to a system such as yours. Of course, you or any other end user is welcome to go as far as they would like in the pursuit of a higher level of performance. But given the limited band pass of the woofer's application, hugely expensive cabling might not yield as much of a sonic benefit as it would in full-range applications."

Eager to discover the difference better power cables might make, I decided to try two discontinued Nordost Valhalla power cables that were not currently in use. Addressing the power source, however, was not possible. The only outlets available to me were neither on my dedicated line nor anywhere near my AudioQuest and Stromtank power devices. At least the electrical wiring had been changed from aluminum to copper, and I had made some other changes that further cleaned up power.

While Daryl never mentioned interconnects, this inveterate audiophile could not help but wonder if improving them would also make a difference. My replacement for the loaner Mogamis, two 5m Nordost Blue Heaven subwoofer cables with XLR terminations, arrived at the end of the review period.[11]

Let the music begin

A musical selection Peter used for setup was an organ rendition of "Davy Jones" from Hans Zimmer's *Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man's Chest*, performed by Anna Lapwood on her EP *Midnight Sessions at the Royal Albert Hall* (24/96 MQA, Sony/Tidal). Engineered by Mike Hatch, the recording captures the space and less-than-silent backdrop of Royal Albert Hall, the distance between mikes and organ, and the instrument's myriad mechanical sounds. The three-minute, 37-second track begins with chimelike sounds in the organ's high register. Then the music dives deeper and deeper until it delivers deep bass strong enough to test any system. Ultimately, it returns to those lovely atmospheric twinkles before ending with the sound of the hall.

Even before the phase was set, we compared listening with the subs on and off. To paraphrase Bob Dylan's memorable line from "Subterranean Homesick Blues," "You don't need a weatherman to know which way the wind blows," you don't need golden ears to hear that low bass grows stronger and more focused when the LōKēs are engaged.

But the LōKēs did more than reinforce the Alexia V's deep bass. As airy and 3D as "Davy Jones" sounded through the Alexia Vs by themselves, the sense of a vast hall (designed to hold 8000 people) increased noticeably when the LōKēs were engaged. My jaw dropped.

Peter's jaw dropped, too, when, after we had adjusted phase, I insisted on switching from the supplied power cables to Nordost Valhalla. The improvement in deep bass focus, solidity, and color was quite noticeable and musically spot on. It is enlightening to

11 While the Blue Heavens were on their way, I checked in with speaker setup wiz Gary Bruestle of Seattle dealership Definitive Audio. Gary told me that better interconnects would make a difference.

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affirm that power cables can make a difference even when only low frequencies are involved, even with class-D amplifiers like the one in the LōKē.

The sound improved further when I switched subwoofer interconnects from Mogami 2534 to Nordost Blue Heaven. A soundstage that was already awesome in depth and width grew further and delivered the most convincing depiction of you-are-there room boundaries I've heard from my system.

The time was ripe for a favorite bass assault, the second movement of the Shostakovich Symphony No.11 from Andris Nelsons and the Boston Symphony Orchestra's superb recording of Shostakovich Symphonies Nos. 4 & 11 "The Year 1905" (24/96 FLAC, DG/Qobuz). The LōKēs provided an impressive improvement in deep bass and soundstage depth. With the Valhalla power cables, bass grew tauter and gained color. Soundstage depth and realism improved. Changing the interconnects added impact and color, individual elements within the soundstage cohered better, the depth of the soundstage became more convincing, and the apparent boundaries of the recording venue (Boston's Symphony Hall) solidified.

How audible would the improvement be on a recording consisting solely of soprano and piano? The lowest note on a standard piano descends to 27.5Hz, but the piano part on soprano Sandrine Piau's recording of Carl Loewe's lieder "Ach neige, du Schmerzenreiche," from *Chimère* (24/96 MQA, Alpha/Tidal), rarely dips into the low bass. Yet as soon as I turned on the LōKēs, voice and piano moved farther back, with more believable space between the instrument and the singer, and more vivid colors in the piano.

Nor was this effect limited to stereo recordings. When I cued up soprano Maria Callas's incomparably powerful 1954 mono recording of Boito's great spinto aria "L'altra note in fondo al mare," from *Mefistofele*, on the remastered *Callas Sings Operatic Arias* (24/96 MQA, Warner Classics/Tidal), air, depth, and realism increased.

Returning to stereo, vocalist Rosa Passos and bassist Ron Carter's 2003 recording of Jobim's "Insensatez" from *Entre Amigos* (16/44.1 FLAC, Chesky/Tidal), with guitarist Lula Galvão and percussionist Paulo Braga, has never sounded remotely as good in my music room as it did with the LōKēs in the system. Every bass note was focused, with believable color.

One of the biggest revelations arrived via the DSD files of the live recording of the world premiere of Reinbert de Leeuw's 46-minute symphony *Der nächtliche Wanderer*, conducted by the composer (DSD, Challenge Classics CC72957). Reviewed elsewhere in this issue, this tour de force for onstage and offstage orchestra and tape accompaniment is an acoustic triumph for Jan Stellingwerff's original sound engineering, Northstar Recording Services' audio restoration, and Bert van der Wolf and Oude Avenhuis's editing and remastering. Rarely will you encounter a modern digital recording with so large and deep a soundstage, such pinpoint imaging, and such involving stage noise: The sound of the dog barking in the distance at the start and close is surprisingly true-to-life. The LōKēs' assistance enhanced impact and depth of the percussion and delivered a mesmerizing sense of you-are-there realism. My husband, who prefers to lie on the living room couch and listen to music through earbuds while cuddling with three adoring dogs, paid a rare visit to the listening room and sat in transfixed silence, unable to move. With the LōKēs engaged, every new instrumental or taped sound—every beat of the drum—impressed as a major event.

Beyond the Woof

What makes this review different from virtually all others I've written over the decades is that the LōKē is the first subwoofer I've ever tried in my system. As much as every review is a journey of discovery, this one was unique in that I was learning for the first time, without benefit of comparison, how much more than woofing cleanly, with authority, a fine subwoofer can accomplish.

I expected bass to be bigger, deeper, and more fleshed out with the LōKē. That it certainly was. What I did not expect was the ability of Wilson's smallest subwoofer to enhance every aspect of the listening experience—especially the sense of space. As the soundstage grew deeper, wider, and more coherent, as soundstage boundaries became more evident, as air between and around instruments and voices increased and the quality of music reproduction rose to mesmerizing levels, my appreciation for the transformative potential of the LōKē grew exponentially.

Audition the LōKē. Throw all your favorite music at it, and give it a major bass workout. Turn it on and off and on again and discover for yourself what a difference it makes. If your room and speakers are appropriate for its size and power and your budget allows, it's hard to imagine that you won't be tempted to invite Thor's little brother into your system for a long stay. My highest recommendation. ■

ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT

Digital sources dCS Vivaldi Apex DAC, Vivaldi Upsampler Plus, and Vivaldi Master Clock; Innuos Statement Next-Gen Music Server; Small Green Computer Sonore Deluxe opticalModule; Uptone Audio EtherRegen with SOtM sCLK-OCX10 Master Clock and sPS-500 power supply; Nordost QNet switch and two QSource linear power supplies; HDPlex 300 linear power supply; Synology 5-bay 1019+ network-attached storage device with Ferrum Hypsos linear/switching hybrid power supply; Linksys MR9000 mesh router and Arris modem; Apple 2023 iPad Pro and 2017 MacBook Pro laptop with 2.8GHz Intel i7, SSD, 16GB RAM.
Preamplifier Dan D'Agostino Momentum HD.
Power amplifiers Dan D'Agostino Momentum M400 MxV monoblocks.
Loudspeakers Wilson Audio Specialties Alexia V.
Cables Digital: Nordost Odin 1, Odin 2, and Valhalla 2 (USB and Ethernet), Frey 2 (USB adapter); AudioQuest WEL Signature; Wireworld Platinum Starlight Cat8 (Ethernet), OM1 62.5/125 multimode duplex (fiber-optic). Interconnect (XLR): Nordost Odin 2 and Blue Heaven subwoofer, AudioQuest Dragon, Canare (subwoofers). Speaker: Nordost Odin 2, AudioQuest Dragon. AC: Nordost Odin 2, Valhalla 2, Valhalla 1; AudioQuest Dragon and Firebird. Umbilical cords: Ghent Audio Canare on HDPlex 300 LPS and NAS; QSource Premium DC cables with Lemo terminations for QSources; SOtM sPS-500 umbilical cable for SOtM Master clock.
Accessories Grand Prix Monza 8-shelf double rack and amp stands, 1.5" Formula platform; Symposium Ultra Platform; Nordost 20-amp QB8 Mark III, QKore 1 and 6; Titanium and Bronze Sort Kones, Sort Lifts; Stromtank S 2500 Quantum MK II power generator; AudioQuest Niagara 7000 and 5000 power conditioners, NRG Edison outlets, JitterBugs; ADD-Powr Sorcer X4; Environmental Potentials EP2050EE surge protector/filter; Wilson Audio Pedestals; A/V RoomService Polyflex Diffusers; Resolution Acoustics room treatment; eight Stillpoints Clouds; HRS DPX-14545 Damping Plates; Marigo Aida CD mat.
Listening room 20' L × 16' W × 9'4" H.
—Jason Victor Serinus

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FOLLOW-UP

BY JOHN ATKINSON & JASON VICTOR SERINUS

THIS ISSUE: JA tries out Dirac Live room correction on the Dynaudio Focus 10, and JVS tries the latest Innuos Statement server with the latest firmware and software.

DYNAUDIO FOCUS 10 ACTIVE LOUDSPEAKER

Jason Victor Serinus was impressed by this small, two-way, active all-in-one speaker from Denmark.[1] He concluded his February 2023 review[2] by writing, "Designed as a 'complete wireless sound system,' the Dynaudio Focus 10 active monitors are the most musically satisfying one-stop playback solution I've had the pleasure of hanging with. ... Within its limitations of image size and bass quantity, the Focus 10 is one of the most musically satisfying active loudspeakers I've had the pleasure to audition. Highly recommended."

I was also impressed by the Focus 10's measured performance, which, as I wrote in the Measurements sidebar, "indicates a well-sorted design." Aside from a slight excess of energy between 1kHz and 1.6kHz and a slight lack between 5kHz and 7kHz, the farfield frequency response, averaged across a 30° horizontal angle centered on the tweeter axis, was respectably even (fig.1).

JVS wasn't able to investigate one aspect of the Dynaudio speaker's performance in his review: built-in Dirac Live, which can be used to equalize and optimize the Focus 10's in-room behavior. I still had the Dynaudios I had measured for the original review,[3] and as I had used Dirac Live3 successfully with the sample of NAD's M10 integrated amplifier that I had purchased after my review,[4] I decided to examine the effect of Dirac Live, which is the objective of this follow-up review.

I followed the instructions in the manual to set up the Dynaudio Focus 10s, first installing the Dynaudio Connect and Control app on my iPad mini then connecting the Primary speaker to my router. After the speaker was connected to the network, it updated its firmware to version 1.2.880xb3ed1c3. (Another firmware update, which will offer bass-management options and allow Dirac to work with external subwoofers, will be available later this year.)

The source for my auditioning was my Roon Nucleus+ server sending audio data to the left, Primary speaker over Ethernet. The Primary speaker was connected to the right, Client speaker with a 4m length of coaxial S/PDIF cable. I placed the speakers in the positions where my KEF LS50s worked well: The left speaker's woofer was 31" from the LPs that line the nearest wall; the right speaker's woofer was 49" from the books that line its nearest wall. Both speakers sat on 24" Celestion stands, their single pillars filled with a mixture of dry sand and lead shot, and were 73" from the wall behind them. I left off the grilles.

I used the Dynaudios without Dirac room correction for a couple of weeks in order to become familiar with their sonic character. The high frequencies were a little on the hot side, so I used the Dynaudio app to set the tonal balance to "Dark." The blue trace in fig.2 shows the difference in the anechoic tweeter-axis response with the "Dark" setting. The output at 20kHz is tilted down by 1.1dB; the output at 100Hz is tilted up by the same amount.

With this tonal balance, the highs were at the optimal level referenced to the natural-sounding, uncolored midrange.

Stereo imaging was precisely focused, and the soundstage extended behind the speakers when appropriate. What impressed me most was the Focus 10's bass. I was streaming random tracks with Roon when my attention was caught by a recording of Japanese percussionist Kuniko Kato performing J.S. Bach's Cello Suite No.1 in G Major on a marimba (24/96 FLAC, Linn Records/Qobuz). The low notes had more weight than I was expecting from these small speakers with 5.5" woofers.

As discussed in JVS's review, the Focus 10 uses digital signal processing to adjust its low-frequency extension and sealed-box woofer alignment depending on the output level. At the lowest sound pressure levels, the Focus 10 has full output down to around 30Hz. As the SPL increases, the LF rolloff starts higher in frequency with a shallower slope. At the SPL I was playing the Kuniko track, averaging around 77dB(C), the Dynaudios were offering extended low frequencies.

This can be seen in fig.3. The red trace shows the spatially averaged response of the Dynaudio Focus 10s at the same SPL in my room,[5] with the "Dark" balance setting. The peak just below 30Hz is due to the excitation of the lowest-frequency mode in my room; the response extends at full level to 55Hz, though with a slight boost in the upper bass. For reference, the blue trace shows the spatially averaged response of the KEF LS50s. Both pairs of speakers offer a smoothly balanced upper midrange and treble; the peaks and dips below 400Hz are due to interference with the direct sound by boundary reflections. However, the LS50s' low frequencies roll off prematurely compared with the Focus 10s'. (For critical listening with the KEFs, I use Roon's parametric equalizer to extend their in-room

1 The Focus 10 costs $5500/pair. Dynaudio A/S. Sverigesvej 15, 8660 Skanderborg, Denmark. US distributor: Dynaudio North America, 500 Lindberg Ln., Northbrook, IL 60062. Tel: (847) 730-3280. Web: dynaudio.com.

2 See stereophile.com/content/dynaudio-focus-10-active-loudspeaker.

3 The serial numbers were 10033212 (Primary, left) and 10033213 (Client, right).

4 See stereophile.com/content/nad-masters-series-m10-streaming-integrated-amplifier-trying-dirac-live-room-correction.

5 Using the FuzzMeasure 3.0 program, a Metric Halo MIO2882 FireWire-connected audio interface, and a 96kHz sample rate, I average 20 1/6-octave–smoothed spectra, individually taken for the left and right speakers, in a rectangular grid 36" wide × 18" high and centered on the positions of my ears.

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low-frequency response to 42Hz. As long as I keep the SPL below 85dB(C), the little KEFs offer effective low-frequency performance without noticeable distortion.)

It was time to investigate the effect of Dirac Live.[6] I installed the Dirac Live app on the Mac mini and plugged the USB microphone supplied with my NAD M10 into the USB port on my Mac mini. When I ran the app, it found and identified the NAD microphone and the Dynaudio speakers, set the speaker's tonal balance to Neutral, reduced the playback volume, and performed a loudness check. I then followed the on-screen instructions, placing the microphone in each of the nine positions specified by the app and performing a "chirp" test at each. After the last test, Dirac Live calculated a correction filter, named it "Anduin," and asked for it to be saved to one of the Focus 10's eight filter slots. I could then activate Anduin with the Dynaudio iPad app.

I started listening to some favorite tracks, but it was immediately obvious that there was too much midbass and upper bass. Bass guitar was too rich-sounding; the piano's left-hand register, in Vladimir Ashkenazy's performance of Rachmaninoff's Piano Concerto No.3, with Bernard Haitink conducting the Concertgebouw Orchestra (16/44.1 rip from CD, Decca), had way too much weight.

A measurement of the in-room response revealed that Dirac's Anduin filter was boosting the region between 60Hz and 200Hz by up to 5dB. Here's what I think happened. I had performed the Dirac response measurements at too high a level, which caused the Focus 10s to roll off their low prematurely. The Anduin filter was compensating for that rolloff. When, subsequently, I played music at a lower level, Dirac's correction in the bass was too much. It is necessary, therefore, to perform the Dirac measurements at the same SPL as will be used for the auditioning.

I repeated the Dirac Live calibration routine with the Dynaudio's volume control set to the same level, "57," that I had been using for my non-Dirac listening. I saved the new filter, "Rhine," to the Focus 10's second slot and measured the spatially averaged response at the same volume control setting (fig.4, red trace). Other than a small peak centered on 250Hz, the in-room response in the midrange and low-treble region was now superbly even compared with the red trace in fig.3, falling within ±0.7dB limits from 300Hz to 3.7kHz. The mid-treble slopes down a little more with Dirac's Rhine filter than it had with the "Dark" balance setting, which I heard as a slight lack of air on the Rachmaninoff recording. The upper bass was still around 3dB too high in level, and the speakers excited the lowest-frequency room mode to a greater degree than with the "Dark" setting.

To create the Anduin and Rhine filters, I used Dirac Live's suggested target response. For my next attempt, I modified the target response by reducing the amount of correction below 200Hz. The spatially averaged response with the resultant "Hegel" filter is shown as the blue trace in fig.4. The upper bass is now close to the average level in the midrange, though now there is insufficient midbass energy.

The lowest-frequency room mode was still excited with Hegel but not as much as with Rhine. My final experiment was therefore to adjust the target response to roll off the low bass. I also tried to compensate for the small peak at 250Hz. The in-room response below 310Hz with this filter, named "Broglie," is shown as the green trace in fig.4. Its output between 40Hz and 200Hz is identical to that of Hegel, and the peak between 200Hz and 300Hz has been reduced in level. The low frequencies now roll off precipitously below 35Hz, though there is a return to the Hegel output below 25Hz. (Dirac Live's target response appears to be restricted to frequencies above 20Hz.)

With the Dynaudio Connect and Control

6 Something that should be noted if a Focus 10 owner is intending to use this speaker to play movie soundtracks is that Direct Live correction introduces around 61.5ms of additional latency—almost two video frames—to the uncorrected speaker's 11.7ms latency.

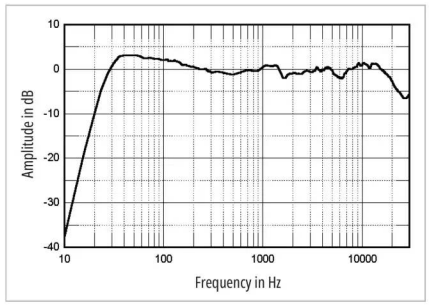

Fig.1 Dynaudio Focus 10, Neutral setting, anechoic response on HF axis at 50", averaged across 30° horizontal window and corrected for microphone response, with the nearfield woofer response plotted below 300Hz.

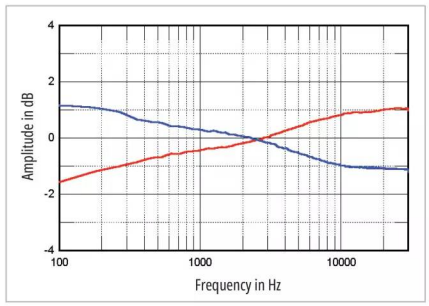

Fig.2 Dynaudio Focus 10, effect on the Neutral setting of the Bright (red trace) and Dark (blue) settings (1dB/vertical div.).

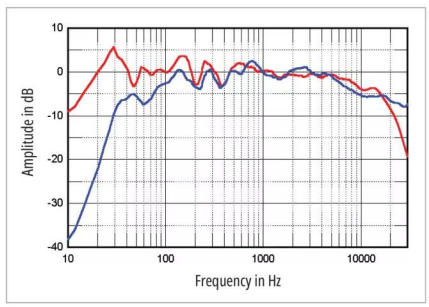

Fig.3 Dynaudio Focus 10, Dark setting (red trace), and KEF LS50 (blue), spatially averaged, 1/6-octave response in JA's listening room.

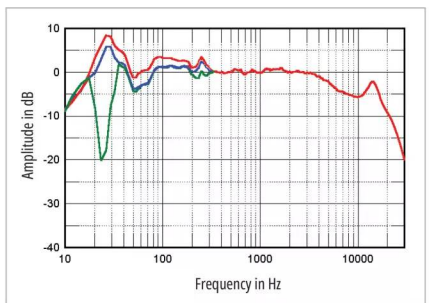

Fig.4 Dynaudio Focus 10, spatially averaged, 1/6-octave response in JA's listening room with Dirac Live correction: Rhine filter (red trace); Hegel filter (blue); and Broglie filter (green).

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app, I could switch between the four correction filters I had created. I started listening with Broglie. While this filter's low-frequency rolloff will protect the Focus 10's small woofers from excessive excursions, I was not satisfied with what I heard. While stereo-imaging specificity was excellent and low frequencies were well-defined, soundstage depth seemed restricted and the hall ambience seemed suppressed on *Encore*, featuring live recordings I had made at the 1997 Santa Fe Chamber Music Festival (16/44.1 ALAC, Stereophile STPH011-2). Too much correction is too much of a good thing.

I abandoned Broglie and continued listening, alternating Rhine or Hegel. The double bass on Mendelssohn's Sextet in D, Op.110, sounded a little reticent with Hegel. Rhine brought it into the correct balance with the piano and string quartet. But on a recording of Vaughan Williams's Tuba Concerto (24/96 FLAC, Royal Concertgebouw/Qobuz), the blatty bottom register of soloist Perry Hoogendijk's instrument had a touch too much bloom with Rhine. Hegel worked best with this recording, as it did with Cantus performing Curtis Mayfield's "It's Alright" (16/44.1 ALAC, from *Outside the Box*, Cantus Records), on which I had boosted the upper bass a little in the mix to give the a cappella performance a sufficiently firm tonal foundation.

Overall, I found that the Rhine filter I had created with Dirac Live worked well with all kinds of music. On "Nell's Bells," from Attention Screen's *Live at Merkin Hall* (16/44.1 ALAC, Stereophile STPH018-2), the hall acoustic surrounding Bob Reina's Steinway grand, Don Fiorino's ukulele, Chris Jones's fretless bass guitar, and Mark Flynn's drums was palpable.[7] The tonalities of the instruments were, for want of a better word, perfect, though, as JVS commented, the stereo image was small. (That's what you get with small speakers.)

Even without Dirac Live, the Dynaudio Focus 10 combines ease of setup and use, stereo imaging precision, and a natural-sounding midrange with surprising low-frequency extension for such a small speaker, provided the SPL is kept below 85dB or so. It would be a great fit'n'forget choice as a complete music system for use in relatively small listening rooms. Dirac Live takes its sound quality to another level.—**John Atkinson**

7 See my essay on how I recorded this concert at stereophile.com/content/attention-screen-making-ilive-merkin-halli-page-3.

INNUOS STATEMENT MUSIC SERVER

On April 2020, when I reviewed[8] the original version of the top-of-the-line, two-box Innuos Statement Music Server / Streamer (then $13,750, now $16,700+), it was able to do all of the things you would hope a server could do: play back music from its internal SSD or an external NAS; stream music from several music-streaming services; and easily play and rip music from CDs inserted into a built-in disc drive (a feature some other servers lack). I liked that it allowed me to use either Roon or—for those who do not wish to subscribe to Roon or who don't need that program's rich feature set—InnuOS.

I also had some concerns. I thought the Statement offered negligible sonic improvements over playback through my considerably smaller and less expensive Roon Nucleus+ music server / streamer. The InnuOS software was best described as a frustrating work in progress; Innuos Founder Nuno Vitorino told me then that it was about to be "rebuilt from the ground up." Innuos's preference for a carefully engineered, reclocked asynchronous USB output was also a cause for concern because, in my experience, USB often sounds inferior to Ethernet, AES3, or S/PDIF.

More than a year ago, Innuos released the Innuos Statement NG ($21,700 with 1TB of internal SSD storage), which included a major upgrade to its power supply. It also introduced the Innuos Sense control app for phone and pad, and made it easy to switch between InnuOS and Roon playback software. The company had already begun to revamp InnuOS, and that work has continued. These changes mandated this follow-up review.

Before I installed the Statement NG,

I witnessed Statement / Statement NG comparisons at two audio shows. Both times, the sonic improvements the Next-Gen power supply yielded were manifest. Under challenging show conditions, the differences in transparency, color saturation, and musical realism were easy to hear, not at all subtle.

During the same period, my ability to better hear components' strengths and weaknesess in my own system improved with multiple system upgrades. First, the dCS Rossini DAC / Clock pairing was replaced by dCS's top-of-the-line, three-piece dCS Vivaldi Apex DAC / Master Clock / Upsampler Plus. Instead of dCS's built-in volume control, I now use the D'Agostino Momentum HD preamp, which highlights color differences. My Wilson Alexia Vs were replaced by the considerably more revealing, better-controlled Wilson Alexia Vs with the now-standard Acoustic Diodes. Monoblock amplifiers were upgraded from D'Agostino Progressions to a pair of D'Agostino Momentum M400 MxVs. I upped the Roon Nucleus+ performance by switching its external power source from an HDPlex 200 to the notably quieter, more effective Nordost QSource with top-line QSource LEMO connectors. I simplified, upgraded, and refined my Ethernet optical streaming connection; added a Ferrum Hypsos linear/switching hybrid power supply to the NAS (network-attached storage device) and a SOtM sCLK-OCX10 Master Clock and sPS-500 power supply to the etherRegen optical converter; changed some cabling and room treatment; and upgraded my electrical wiring. So, time for a new listen.

In response to an email query, Vitorino shared with me that the Statement could be upgraded at the factory to the Next-Gen linear power supply. The upgrade entails changes to the AC/DC conversion section in the Statement's bottom chassis and the

8 See stereophile.com/content/innuos-statement-music-server.

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vpiindustries.com

DC-regulation stage in the upper chassis. Specifically, the upgrade includes five major changes:

- Replacing passive rectification with active rectification. This change, Vitorino wrote, "drastically reduces power dissipation, heat generation, voltage loss, and diode on/off switching noise. Because the bridge is faster, it lowers the overall impedance of the power supply."
- Upgrading the reservoir capacitors in collaboration with power supply expert Dr. Sean Jacobs[9] with a "massive, 10mH choke and 500,000µF of Mundorf capacitors," an increase in capacitance of 3× over the Statement's previous supply.
- A new "Adaptive Vibration Control" platform for mounting the capacitor modules, which combines Panzerholz wood with "a specially formulated gel-layer reducing significantly the vibration at mid and high frequencies."
- Dr. Jacobs was also involved in the design of new regulator modules using CX architecture, which "allows us to lower peak-to-peak noise around 100 times compared to the previous regulator module." Component quality has also been upgraded to include "several Audio Note Kaisei capacitors per regulator module."
- A new "CPU Booster module" provides "up to 15A current to the CPU while maintaining a Linear Power Supply Design."

"The new power supply design," Vitorino continued, "benefits all components on the Statement such as the CPU, SSD, USB Reclocker with its own OCXO clock, and Ethernet module with its own OCXO clock.

"We use a direct, 24MHz OCXO with 3 parts per billion–precision clock on the USB Reclocker as well as a separate 25MHz OCXO (3 ppb) clock for the Ethernet clock module," he said. "This means the Statement already uses very high precision clocks instead of relying on an external 10MHz clock, which would then require a PLL to convert the 10MHz signal to the respective 24MHz and 25MHz required. This reclocking scheme avoids losing precision from an external clock's external cables and connectors as well as losing precision from using the [phase-locked loop]."

Once the Statement NG had settled in, it was easy to hear the improvement over the Roon Nucleus+, even with its external power supply, regardless of software choice. Results were consistent whether I played back files stored on the Statement NG's internal SSD, files stored on my NAS, or streamed from Tidal or Qobuz. On every parameter on my audiophile checklist—color, image size, transparency, weight, depth, musical flow, detail, and emotional impact—the Innuos Statement NG bested the Roon Nucleus+.

While the best-sounding input on the dCS Vivaldi Apex / Upsampler Plus / Vivaldi Master Clock trio remains Ethernet, the Innuos Statement NG delivers its best sound to the Vivaldi by sending its signal through its reclocked USB port. (There is a second USB port that isn't reclocked, which facilitates easy comparisons between clocked and unclocked outputs as well as to Ethernet.)

As Innuos has continued to upgrade InnuOS software, I've grown to use it almost exclusively because with the Statement NG, music sounds more vital than it does through Roon.

In the latest version of InnuOS, a single search now displays recordings from the internal SSD, Qobuz, and Tidal on the same page. (InnuOS previously required separate searches for each source.) Bit depth, sampling rate, format (including MQA, which Innuos supports), and liner notes (when present) are easily accessible. It's also easy to move forward and back within tracks or from track to track. 32-bit file playback is supported. InnuOS can display albums stored in its SSD by the date they were added to the collection as well as by album title, artist, and release date. For this reviewer, who is constantly adding music to his library and needs quick access to the most recent files, this is a make-or-break feature. Still missing is the ability to display albums in streaming-service searches by release date. Nor can you see all available versions of an album on those streaming services; InnuOS currently displays just one, opting for hi-rez whenever it's available.

Sometimes, InnuOS fails to display album art unless the cover files are titled Cover.jpg or Cover.png. Often the first nine tracks of a release fail to display in the correct order unless the files for those tracks begin with "0," as in "01-...", "02-...". If each track's title doesn't start with the track number, tracks will display in the wrong order.

If you listen mostly to music from streaming services or to files downloaded from commercial download sites, it's possible you'll never encounter these problems. They usually have their ducks in a row. But if you rip your CDs or, like me, deal with a lot of pre-release albums, encountering them occasionally is a virtual certainty. InnuOS shares this fault with every music OS I've tried, including Roon. Both products—Roon and InnuOS—often struggle with multi-CD / multi-folder rips,[10] failing to display tracks in the correct order and sometimes splitting a single recording into several folders.

To get around these quirks, you will likely need to edit metadata by hand. Innuos allows for that, providing tools you can use to edit metadata and add imagery.[11]

As of now, InnuOS can only access one volume of a NAS that's formatted into two or more volumes. Only by switching to Roon could I access all four 6TB volumes on my NAS through the Statement NG. Roon can rescan an entire 6TB volume on

9 I wasn't familiar with Jacobs, so I looked him up. He is company director and audio electronics engineer at Custom HiFi Cables Ltd., which specializes in power supplies and power cords but also makes a few interconnects, selling them at prices that are modest in hi-fi terms. He earned the title "Dr." via a PhD in robotics, received in 2010 from the University of Leeds. The title of his dissertation was *Adaptive Control of a Climbing Robot*. He has a master's degree from the same institution, in "mechanotronics," a mixture of mechanical and electronic engineering. That sounds like fine training for designing power supplies. **—Jim Austin**

10 Think full-length opera or a multi-CD set of Beethoven's nine symphonies, especially when the individual CDs in the box do not correspond to any previous commercial release.

11 I haven't edited metadata in InnuOS, but I've done it in Roon, and it's frustrating. It's unfortunately still true, as it has been ever since I first started ripping CDs, that anyone serious about streaming needs to learn to use a music-metadata editor. I haven't tried that many, but my preference is mp3tag. There's a learning curve; probably, there are more user-friendly apps. See mp3tag.de/en/index.html.

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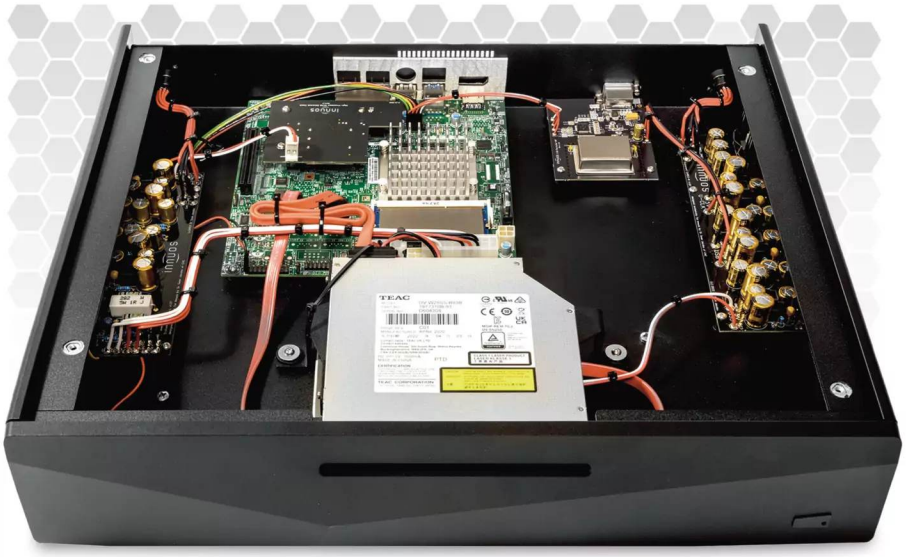
my NAS and add new titles and tracks far faster than InnuOS can. Vitorino assures me that future software updates will address his software's NAS-access limitations, improve rescan performance for users with large NAS libraries, and automatically add new titles once they're loaded onto an external NAS. (Roon, too, requires a rescan if you want to immediately access files newly added to a NAS.)

Currently, the largest storage option Innuos offers is 8TB; the 8TB option adds $2800 to the price. Servers from Aurender and Antipodes offer storage options up to 24TB storage.

Roon is better than InnuOS in services, integration, matching albums with their covers, metadata manipulation, and so on. InnuOS, on the other hand, sounds better.

What's more, I continue to appreciate the ability to use the Statement NG to easily rip some CDs containing recordings not available via streaming services—to its internal SSD or my NAS. I can scan and add cover art and liner notes to ripped CDs to the CD's music folder, and if I give those files the right filenames, InnuOS recognizes the cover art and liner notes I've scanned and added to those CDs' music folders.

The Innuos Statement NG music server, with its Next-Gen linear power supply



upgrade and the latest InnuOS software, sounds superior to the pre-NG statement and to the current Roon Nucleus+; indeed, it is sonically excellent in absolute terms. The latest InnuOS software offers major advances over earlier versions. Roon remains the superior app for finding music, learning about artists, and so on, but Innuos is superior for playback. I now use InnuOS as playback software a good 98% of the time, because it consistently delivers superior color saturation, transparency, and musical satisfaction. While the InnuOS software has room for improvement, the Statement NG has become an essential part of my reference system. It deserves the highest rating in Recommended Components.

—Jason Victor Serinus

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Teatro Morlacchi at Umbria.

ON THE ROAD AGAIN, A YEAR LATER

A YEAR AFTER HIS FIRST POST-PANDEMIC JAUNT, TOM CONRAD RETURNS TO EUROPE FOR—WHAT ELSE?—JAZZ.
BY **THOMAS CONRAD**

IT HAS BEEN A YEAR SINCE MY PIECE "ON THE ROAD AGAIN: A JAZZ FESTIVAL JOURNAL FROM A SUMMER OF PLAGUE AND WAR" APPEARED, IN THE NOVEMBER 2022 ISSUE OF THIS MAGAZINE. IT DESCRIBED THREE EUROPEAN JAZZ FESTIVALS I ATTENDED IN JULY 2022.

In July 2023, I returned to Europe to attend two festivals. The COVID-19 plague and its fallout had significantly subsided. The war in Ukraine was still raging, but this time I didn't get near it. In 2022, I went to a festival in Romania, which borders Ukraine. In 2023, I only went to Italy.

Like the year before, my first 2023 stop was the Südtirol Jazz Festival. It is based in Bolzano but extends beyond it to other sites in the northernmost province of Italy, bordering Austria. It is a region most tourists, in their pilgrimages to Rome, Florence, and Venice, never see. It is one of the most beautiful places on earth. The Südtirol festival deeply integrates its music into its extraordinary physical environment. Concerts are often set on the cliffs and in the valleys of two mountain ranges. Crumbling castles and terraced vineyards cling to the sheer sides of the emerald green Italian Alps. The silver Dolomites, with their jagged massifs, tower even higher in the sky. Sometimes reaching the music requires two cable car rides.

The Südtirol festival started small in 1982. It now lasts for 10 days. In 2023, the festival presented 90 concerts by 150 artists in 50 locations. But it feels intimate. Most sites hold small audiences that sit close to the music. Famous artists rarely play there. Südtirol books emerging musicians who push the

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jazz envelope. You don't go to Bolzano for bebop. You go there to immerse yourself in experimentation and rule-breaking. You go there knowing that some new synapses will fire in your brain.

A quintessential example of a Südtirol experience was provided by a little-known French trio, La Litanie des Cimes. They are Clément Janinet (violin and compositions), Elodie Pasquier (clarinets), and Clement Petit (cello). They played their unclassifiable, haunting music twice, both times at noon. Once was in a deep forest. Once was at the edge of a ravine at 6500'. At a jazz festival, noon is early. *La Litanie des Cimes* started off two consecutive festival days by turning everyone's mood inward and contemplative. The trio's quiet, intricate counterpoint became part of the woods and mountains.

A few of the names in the 2023 program might be familiar to American jazz fans. Francesco Diodati, one of the most creative under-40 guitarists in Europe, is a member of a band led by trumpeter Enrico Rava, Italy's most famous living jazz musician. Drummer Gard Nilssen made his ECM recording debut as a leader last year. Reed player Dan Kinzelman and bassist Ruth Goller are presences on the avant-garde scenes of, respectively, Italy and the UK. Baritone saxophone warrior Mats Gustafsson has been a force in left-of-center European jazz for years.

Over the years, many new names at this festival have gone on to wider recognition. Among those who displayed such promise this year were virtuoso guitarist Antoine Boyer of France, trumpet badass Alistair Robert Payne of the UK, and versatile drummer Sun-Mi Hong of Korea. Remember their names.

My next stop was the Umbria Jazz Festival, which was celebrating its 50th anniversary. What happens every July in Perugia is truly a *festival*, a bacchanalian street party. It is also a gathering of the tribes, a convocation of the faithful. (Lee Konitz once said, "Jazz is what we have instead of religion.")

For 10 days and nights, it totally takes over the historic center of one of Italy's most beautiful hill towns. Thousands of revelers throng cobblestone streets. The main venues are the outdoor Arena Santa Giuliana, the horseshoe-shaped, 18th century Teatro Morlacchi, and Sala Podiani in the 13th century Palazzo dei Priori. There is also free music on outdoor stages at either end of Corso Vannucci, the main street of the Old Town. A manic marching band, Funk Off, parades down Corso Vannucci twice a day, trailed by children and dogs.

Umbria took on even greater intensity this year due to its 50th anniversary. Very few jazz festivals can lay claim to 50 years. People responded to the magnitude of the moment by partying harder. Carlo Pagnotta started it in 1973 and has run it ever since. On the last day of the festival, it was announced that he will continue as artistic director. (He is 90 and there had been rumors that he would step down.)

Bob Dylan played on opening night for 4800 people in a sold-out Arena Santa Giuliana. I had never seen Dylan live. It was an experience of profound nostalgia, to finally hear that nasal voice in person, the sly, talky voice that is part of the soundtrack to the movie of our lives. Yet the night was underwhelming. Dylan's management had specified minimal stage lighting and no video screens. The huge screens on either side of the stage were dark. With the possible exception of those who had paid €178 for a ticket and sat toward the front, you could not see Dylan well. His twanging voice sounded familiar but disembodied. It was also surprising that he sat or stood at a piano all night. He picked up a harmonica once but never a guitar. Still, I got goose bumps when he broke into "I'll Be Your Baby Tonight."

Umbria always presents some pop acts in the arena. Besides Dylan, this year's bookings included Ben Harper (boring) and Italian stars Paolo Conte and Mika (I passed). The best jazz night had a double bill of the Brad Mehldau Trio and the Branford Marsalis Quartet. Enzo Capua, the artistic consultant to the Umbria organization who is almost as legendary as his boss Pagnotta, was sitting in the press section. After Mehldau's set, he could be heard to intone, "The best piano trio in the world." No one argued with him. Snarky Puppy was also fun; this little big band has found the secret sauce for blending pop-cultural friendliness with genuine jazz combativeness. Also fun was "Eastwood Symphonic": Kyle Eastwood's quintet was joined by no fewer than two orchestras. The large stage of the arena was filled with 59 musicians playing themes from the films of Eastwood's father, Clint. Less fun was Herbie Hancock, whose lame, sloppy set was all too typical of his recent performances.

At Umbria, the jazz nerve center is the Morlacchi, which holds almost 800 people. It is a magical place to hear music. When you sit on the main floor, five tiers of opera boxes ascend high above you to a ceiling covered with Renaissance-style paintings. During the festival, the 71st annual *DownBeat* Critics Poll came out. Of the many jazz polls, it is the most closely watched. Kenny Barron, Fred Hersch, Bill Frisell, and Samara Joy placed either #1 or #2 in six different categories in the voting. In a three-day period, all four of them gave memorable performances at the Morlacchi. There has been a buzz over Joy on the jazz street in the past year. Her concert showed why, although she was more interested in demonstrating the range and power of her exceptional vocal instrument than in interpreting the emotional content of her chosen songs. She is 23 and has the tools to become a major singer.

Clockwise from above: Free stage, Umbria Jazz Festival; Sun-Mi Hong, Südtirol Jazz Festival; Dan Kinzelman, Ruth Goller in the Dolomites; La Litanie des Cimes in the woods.

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Left to right: "the best piano trio in the world": Brad Mehldau, Larry Grenadier, Jeff Ballard, Arena Santa Giuliana; Kyle Eastwood, part of "Eastwood Symphonic", Arena Santa Giuliana; Fred Hersch, Enrico Rava, Teatro Morlacchi.

This year's festival provided further confirmation that the leading jazz scene outside the United States is Italy. Many of the best Italians were there: Enrico Rava. Paolo Fresu. Fabrizio Bosso. Gianluca Petrella. Flavio Boltro. Stefano di Battista. Enrico Morello. And that is before we get to the piano players. The greatest strength of the Italian jazz scene is pianists. The top four are Stefano Bollani, Enrico Pieranunzi, Danilo Rea, and Dado Moroni.

But one searches in vain for Italian names in the 71st *DownBeat* Critics Poll. The almost complete absence of Italians speaks volumes about the ethnocentrism of the American jazz community and its ignorance about jazz beyond its borders. In addition to its possible utility as a jazz travelogue, this article aspires to chip away at that ignorance.

Enrico Pieranunzi is the oldest (73) of the four greatest living Italian pianists, with the largest body of work. Like so many European jazz pianists, he started in classical music. He has recorded albums of improvisations on Scarlatti sonatas. But he chose jazz as his calling in his early 20s.

Over the years, he has collaborated with a long list of important Americans. The one who changed his life was Chet Baker. He met Baker in 1979 and worked with him on and off through the '80s. Everyone who ever worked with Baker worked with him "on and off" because he was a notoriously unreliable drug addict. But if Pieranunzi was ever made to suffer by Baker's bad behavior, he doesn't talk about it. He reveres Baker's memory. He has said that Baker "permanently altered" his own playing and instilled in him a "first belief in lyricism."

Pieranunzi played a solo recital in Sala Podiani. With a capacity of 150, it was the most intimate of the festival's primary venues and was nearly always sold out. An accomplished composer, Pieranunzi played almost exclusively originals. They all sounded vaguely familiar, not because you had heard them before but because their inevitable melodies seemed to already exist somewhere in your musical subconscious. In an interview after his concert, Pieranunzi said, "When you play an original that you have played many times, but the people don't know, you have to make sure to tell a story. In jazz, interpretation is as important as composition. Maybe more. Chet Baker wrote very few tunes in his life, but anything he played became his own song. I think interpretation is an underrated aspect of jazz today. There aren't so many storytellers left."

When he played originals like "Flowering Stones" and "Molto Ancora," their stories were implicit in their plaintive melodies, which kept emerging in myriad permutations, through improvisation. And when he played standards like "Yesterdays" and "Everything I Love," he (like Chet Baker) made them his own, with new harmonies and personal interpretations of their enduring melodies.

Danilo Rea also performed solo in Sala Podiani. When Enzo Capua introduced him, he called Rea the "grandissimo melodista." A Rea solo recital is an unbroken, spontaneous, stream-of-consciousness outpouring. The first song he played was Sting's "Englishman in New York." In an interview later that day, he said that he had never played it before but had heard it on the radio that morning. To say that Rea "plays songs" is imprecise. In his extemporaneous creative process, in his flow of the moment, he comes upon them. Sometimes he barely brushes against a known melody; sometimes he lingers. Songs provoke other songs, in a suite that connects touchpoints of memory.

In two hour–long concerts, Rea never stopped to think and never repeated a song. For an American like me, the second show was best because it contained more tunes I knew. "Moon River" became "The Man I Love" became "As Time Goes By" became "When You Wish Upon a Star" became Carole King's "You've Got a Friend." Rea told me that his piano teacher at the Santa Cecilia conservatory in Rome, Liliana Vallazza, always demanded that he think about "il suono"—the sound. Rea is a rare jazz pianist who gets his own *suono* from a piano. He makes the instrument sing. Leonard Cohen's masterpiece "Hallelujah" has been covered by many singers. Its lyrics are epic.

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Left to right: Samara Joy with Luther Allison, Michael Migliore, and Evan Sherman, Teatro Morlacchi; Gianluca Petrella, Teatro Morlacchi; Enrico Pieranunzi, Sala Podiani.

Rea sang it on the piano, without words. He fully rendered its inherent drama. He filled Sala Podiani with the *suono* of Leonard Cohen's song.

Dado Moroni is a different Italian pianist. He did not start in classical music and is not conservatory-trained. He is self-taught and does not read music well. But his chops are electric. Few living piano players can knock you back in your chair like Moroni can. He is by far the "most American" of the four pianists under discussion. His primary influence is probably Alfred McCoy Tyner. In his solo performance in Sala Podiani, you could sometimes hear Tyner in Moroni's thundering left-hand chords and hurtling right-hand runs. One of the pieces he played was his own "Brother Alfred," which is dedicated to Tyner. Like Tyner's, Moroni's playing contains a spiritual power that makes many fine pianists sound somewhat prissy.

In a different respect, Moroni is fully representative of Italian pianists. For all his aggressive force, he is still a shameless romantic. The great moment in his concert was "My Foolish Heart." It was composed by Victor Young and Ned Washington, but Bill Evans has owned it forever. It is brave for any other pianist to undertake it. Moroni broke your heart with it. His free-flowing elaborations always eventually acquiesced to the irresistible pull of the song.

By broad consensus, Stefano Bollani is the greatest pianist in Italy. (He is one of the greatest anywhere, a fact that you would not glean from the *DownBeat* Critics Poll, which ignored him.) To find comparisons to Bollani's level of keyboard mastery, you have to go to Keith Jarrett and Brad Mehldau, or further back to Oscar Peterson. In Italy, he is a superstar. He did not appear in Sala Podiani, but in Arena Santa Giuliana. With just his piano, solo, he came close to filling it.

Perhaps the most jaw-dropping performance in Bollani's long concert was "All the Things You Are." Jerome Kern's song often stimulates jazz musicians to go for broke, perhaps because of its harmonic erudition and challenging modulations. Bollani incinerated it. He exploded it, at a velocity that rendered unnecessary all future attempts to display technical virtuosity based on "All the Things You Are."

Bollani is a Renaissance Man. He writes books. He composes film scores. With his wife, actress Valentina Cenni, he hosts a popular variety show on Italian television. He has collaborated with many artists outside jazz and even outside music. He is also a comic. If he chose, he could probably make a living as a stand-up comedian.

Unlike the other preeminent pianists to whom he is compared, Bollani has never sustained a working band. The closest he has come is his "Danish Trio," with bassist Jesper Bodilsen and drummer Morten Lund. But they have toured intermittently and recorded only three albums. In an interview before his concert in the arena, he said (in the perfect English of an Italian Renaissance Man), "I've been playing music since I was six. Mainly, I don't want to be bored by myself. So that's the reason I keep changing the ambience around me. A second reason is curiosity. A third reason is that every artist has something to teach me. It's good for me to play with as many as possible."

His curiosity, and the enormous range of his interests, may have become a limiting factor in his career. Rather than fully developing his art within a stable group (as Keith Jarrett did; as Bill Evans did), he is forever moving on to the next project. Another limiting factor is his apparent desire to become a mass entertainer. In the arena, he sang Bob Dylan's "Rainy Day Women #12 & 35." The crowd loved it and sang along when he belted out the refrain, "Everybody must get stoned!" He brought his wife on stage and sang with her, too. (Singing is one of the few things he does not do well.) He sometimes alternated piano playing with stand-up comedy. At the end, he trotted out a parlor trick (a parlor of 4000 people in this case) that he has used for years. He invited the audience to shout out suggestions for tunes to play in an encore, from which he assembled a playlist. He was very funny, often ridiculing song requests. Then he played a wildly miscellaneous, schizophrenic, bombastic, virtuoso encore. It was (as it always is) hilarious. But it would

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Left-to-right: Danilo Rea, Sala Podiani; Dado Moroni, Sala Podiani; Stefano Bollani, Arena Santa Giuliana.

be a loss for jazz if Bollani turned himself into a latter-day Victor Borge or, worse, a Liberace.

Another piano player at the festival turned heads. He is not well known and did not appear as a leader. Julian Oliver Mazzariello played in the band of Fabrizio Bosso. Many Italian critics think Bosso is the most technically gifted trumpet player in Italy, and he was on fire in the Morlacchi. But every time Mazzariello soloed, he introduced into the evening a second aesthetic dimension that expanded upon Bosso's more orthodox expertise. Some of Mazzariello's solos were rhapsodic. Some were stark, in block chords. Some were slow unfoldings, like the one on "For Heaven's Sake."

Later that night, Mazzariello showed up at the jam sessions that sometimes went until five in the morning, in Taverna 36, a club off Corso Vannucci. Given an opportunity to stretch out, he revealed more aspects of his creativity.

In an interview between the Morlacchi concert and the jam session, Mazzariello provided some details from his rather unusual biography. He was born in the UK to an English mother and an Italian father. His parents divorced, and at 17, Mazzariello moved to Italy to live with his father. He said, "It was like starting my life over." He lived near Salerno, on the Amalfi Coast. It had a little jazz scene, into which Mazzariello immersed himself.

He is now 44 and has worked with prominent Italians like Stefano di Battista and Mario Pia De Vito. We live in an era when most jazz musicians record sooner and more often than they should. It is therefore striking that Mazzariello did not make an album under his own name until he was 40. *Debut* was released in 2018. *Reflections* came in 2021. He said, "I was terrified to do them. I'm not really happy with them." But both reveal a fully formed, distinctive piano voice. On moving solo ballads like "Over the Rainbow" and "Body and Soul," *Reflections* demonstrates that Mazzariello has the rare gift that Enrico Pieranunzi spoke about: He is a storyteller. Clearly, he is his own harshest critic and is not inclined toward self-promotion. But he needs to make more records. One hopeful sign: He has said, "I formed a little trio about six months ago, doing Monk music. We have a repertoire of about 12 Monk tunes. I wouldn't mind recording that one day."

It is yet another testament to the strength of the Italian jazz scene that musicians as talented as Julian Oliver Mazzariello can lurk under the radar. ■

RECOMMENDED LISTENING

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ENRICO PIERANUNZI/ MARC JOHNSON/ JOEY BARON, ***LIVE IN JAPAN*** (CAM JAZZ)

DANILO REA, ***DOCTOR 3*** (JANDO)

DADO MORONI, ***THERE IS NO GREATER LOVE*** (STORYVILLE)

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AURAL ROBERT

BY ROBERT BAIRD

THIS ISSUE: On Intervention Records, a limited-edition LP box set of reissues of the studio albums behind *Frampton Comes Alive!*

Frampton at 50

A cultural steamroller that's sold more than 20 million copies so far, *Frampton Comes Alive!* is also the most celebrated example of an artist who broke through to worldwide fame thanks to a live record. In the wake of this monster success, fans went back and listened to Frampton's four solo studio records that predated the live behemoth. Sales and respect grew.

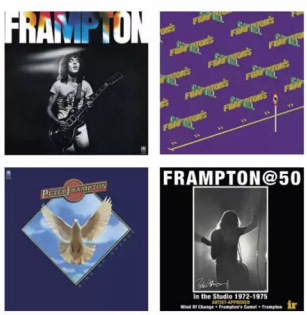
Three of those four releases, *Wind of Change* (1972), *Frampton's Camel* (1973), and *Frampton* (1975), have been remastered and reissued in a limited edition, 180gm vinyl-LP box set, *Frampton@50, In the Studio 1972–1975*, by Intervention Records.

The box presents a mystery: Why didn't the albums that preceded *Comes Alive!* find a larger audience when they were released, especially because they contained studio versions of much of the material that was rerecorded for the live album?

Wind of Change, his first solo record, shows exactly what the guitarist was thinking when he departed his previous band, Humble Pie, in 1971. A mix of acoustic and electric guitars, the album focuses on his vocals, an element of his music that has always been underrated. Produced by Frampton and engineered by Chris Kimsey, the album's title track, an acoustic ballad, displays the characteristic poles of his songwriting: strong melodies, weak lyrics. Weird lines like "I have itchy fingers and butterflies a strange," and attempts at profundity like "Love comes close to wrecking all you have to give/God knows, there's so much to give," do not, however, drag down a melody as strong as "Wind of Change." The same is true for the harder-rocking "It's a Plain Shame."

Though afflicted with a muscle disorder today that is beginning to affect his playing, Frampton has always been one of rock's most inventive and nimble guitar players, and the instrumental accompaniment is stellar throughout. An all-star group of guests—Billy Preston, Klaus Voormann, and Ringo Starr—add to the proceedings.

The failure of the funkier *Frampton's Camel* to find a larger audience upon release is harder to fathom. Filled with quality tunes, heartfelt performances, and the craftsmanship of old pros, *Frampton's Camel*, named after his band at the time, should have been a hit. Produced by Frampton and engineered by the great Eddie Kramer along with Kimsey and Dave Wittman, the recording captures the band—Mick Gallagher (keyboards), Rick Wills (bass), and John Siomos (drums)—tight and in touch with the material. Only Siomos would appear on *Comes Alive!* Rockers like "White Sugar" and "All Night Long" are more than the equal of most 1970s hard rock. Frampton's guitar plays counterpoint with his vocals on a rocked-up cover of Stevie Wonder's "I Believe (When I Fall in Love It Will Be Forever)." The vocals on "Don't Fade Away," another song where the lyrics stray—"Side by side rowing with you, rowing with you"—have always suffered from an in-a-can sonic quality, a defect somewhat corrected on this new reissue. One clear instance where the version on *Comes Alive!* is unmistakably superior to the studio track is the live album's biggest hit, the Top 10 "Do You Feel Like We Do." On *Frampton's Camel*, the arrangement of the original version is slack, the tempo lags, and the energy level is nowhere near what is captured on the live album.



With the guitarist playing all the instruments except bass (Andy Bown) and drums (Siomos), *Frampton* came the closest of the three albums in this set to being a hit (#32). Produced by Frampton and engineered by Kimsey and Andy Knight, the opener, "Day's Dawning," is built around an appealing chorus hook and a climax that features the old rooster-crowing gag (ending with "Shut up!"). Of all the tracks from this trio of albums that appeared on *Comes Alive!*, the version here of "Show Me the Way" is the most similar to—almost exactly the same as—the better-known live version, complete with the talk-box guitar effect. Lyrical struggles sabotage "Nowhere's Too Far (For My Baby)" which opens with the cringeworthy chorus, "I'm crossing my fingers/I'm touching my toes/I'm hoping this feeling will go." Easily one of the guitarist's finest moments as a songwriter, "Nassau/Baby I Love Your Way," is an immortal pop melody from any angle. Even the lyrics, enlivened by lines like "The moon appears to shine and light the skies/With the help of some fireflies," hit a new high.

Frampton@50 was mastered by Chris Bellman at Bernie Grundman Mastering with an all-analog chain. Bellman also cut the lacquers. Several sets of tapes, including 1970s-era tape copies, were considered as sources before $^1/_2$" safety copies from the 1990s A&M Safety Program were judged to be the best. The *Wind of Change* and *Frampton* safeties are sourced from UK production masters, while the *Frampton's Camel* safety is sourced from the original stereo master. The LPs were pressed at Gotta Groove Records in Cleveland, Ohio. The originals were well-recorded; the sound on *Frampton@50* is audibly though not dramatically improved: crisp, detailed, and with some space blown into the mix. The packaging is luxurious with high-gloss tip-on jackets.

The fourth studio album that provided material for *Comes Alive!*, *Somethin's Happening* (1974), could, according to Intervention, be a forthcoming release.

To repeat the question: What made the material on these three albums, generally well-played and well-recorded throughout, suddenly such a world beater on *Frampton Comes Alive!*? For starters, it was originally a bargain double album with a $7.98 list price. His pretty face on the cover didn't hurt. Constant touring had tightened the band and arrangements in what clearly were inspired live performances. (Frampton has often said in interviews that this material was minimally touched up in the studio afterward.) Just as critical, the tempos in the live show were uniformly faster, and the mix, with the drums further forward and a generally more-aggressive guitar sound, served the material better. This re-evaluation is long overdue. ■

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REVINYLIZATION

BY ROBERT BAIRD

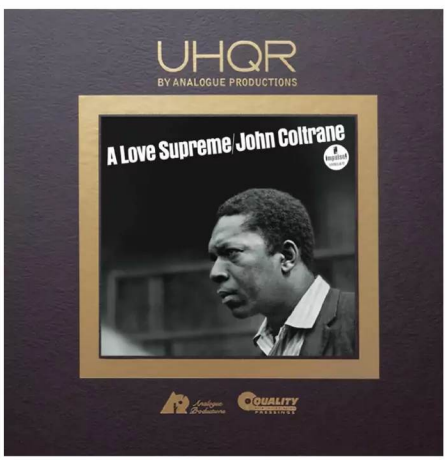
THIS ISSUE: Is the new UHQR from Analogue Productions the best-sounding *A Love Supreme* ever committed to vinyl?

A Love Supreme

Why is John Coltrane's *A Love Supreme* still so resonant nearly 60 years after it was recorded? Much to its credit, it's short (just over 30 minutes) and to the point. If you're going to raise a prayer of gratitude to a higher power and layer spiritual meaning onto music, best not belabor the point. In the case of *A Love Supreme*, that kind of brevity also extended to the recording process. The album was tracked in one day—December 9, 1964—by Rudy Van Gelder in his studio in Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey; Van Gelder also mixed the album. A composed (rather than purely improvised) four-part suite ("Acknowledgement," "Resolution," "Pursuance/Part 4," and "Psalm"), it exudes a certain hypnotic aura. It draws the listener in with an entrancing spirituality, its fealty to love and a higher power. Finally, the incisive, same-page playing of bassist Jimmy Garrison, drummer Elvin Jones, and pianist McCoy Tyner is almost supernatural.

Discogs lists 307 versions of *A Love Supreme*. The actual number is likely higher, but either way this album has a long, redundant history. First released in 1965 in mono and stereo on vinyl LP on Impulse! in the US and Japan, it was issued simultaneously on Sparton Impulse! in Canada, His Master's Voice in the UK, and Hispavox in Spain. Later, it was put out on Probe and Deja Vu in Italy and MCA in the US. The first CDs arrived in 1986 and have been reissued in many countries many times since. Audiophile editions have come from Speaker's Corner in Germany (180gm LP, 2002) and Analogue Productions (SACD and two 45rpm 180gm LPs, 2010), as well as Austrian label Supersense (Acetate, 2021). FLAC, WAV, and other 24/96 high-resolution audio files became available for purchase in 2014. A live performance of *A Love Supreme*, recorded at the 1965 Festival Mondial du Jazz in Antibes, France, was released with the original album and a disc of alternate studio takes on an Impulse! CD as *A Love Supreme Deluxe Edition* in 2002.

In 2015, *A Love Supreme: The Complete Masters* was released in the US, Europe, and Japan in CD, LP, and AIFF-file formats. Along with the original album, that release was considered the final word (at least until the next "discovery"). It contains a pair of "mono reference masters" (of Pts.3 and 4), alternate takes from a December 10, 1964, sextet session, several vocal overdubs, a false start, a breakdown, and the complete Antibes live show. In 2021, a second revelatory live performance of the album, *A Love Supreme: Live in Seattle*, was released by Impulse!/Verve in Europe, Japan, and the US in LP and CD formats. That performance added saxophonists Pharoah Sanders (tenor) and Carlos Ward (alto) and extra bassist Donald Garrett. In 2022, Analogue Productions released a 15ips, $^1/_4$" two-track stereo tape version for $500. Cassettes, 8-track tapes, colored vinyl, club editions, and innumerable "unofficial" editions (read: piracy) have also all been available during the album's inextinguishable afterlife.



As with such musical masterpieces as *The Velvet Underground and Nico* and Miles Davis's *Kind of Blue*, entire record collections have been built around the many versions of *A Love Supreme*. The many editions of one of the greatest jazz albums ever released have, of course, ignited the kind of long-running disputes over sonics that some audiophiles and jazz fans live for. Discussions of which version sounds best have filled forums and comment sections for years. Impassioned arguments can be found supporting various CD and LP incarnations, though most—except for a small minority who swear by the Supersense $500+ acetates—usually come down to a pair of Analogue Productions LP releases. (For Chad Kassem, AP's inimitable owner, competing with yourself is a sweet problem to have.) On one side are those who resolutely claim that the pair of 180gm LPs cut by Ryan Smith at 45rpm in 2010 (sold out but available on eBay and Discogs) are the pinnacle of sonic purity. Very recently, some fans of that 2010 issue have peeled off and thrown their allegiance to AP's new, 200gm 45rpm UHQR version, which was also cut by Smith.

While packaging is either a bonus or beside the point, the extraordinary amount of online kvetching makes it clear that the boxes that house the UHQR records deserve mention. Depending on the amount of space you have for music, it's either too bulky or wonderfully bombproof. In my opinion, it's the kind of well-thought-out protection an expensive record requires. The 12-page booklet is excellent, with liner notes by Ashley Kahn, who wrote *A Love Supreme: The Story of John Coltrane's Signature Album* (2002). The included Technical Specifications Manual details how these records are made and the makeup of Clarity Vinyl (part of Acoustic Sounds' acquisition of Classic Records), and answers most questions about the UHQR process.

Does the world need this new LP version of *A Love Supreme*? The answer to such questions depends on equipment, listening environments, and quirks inherent in each audiophilic brain. I own eight versions, split among LP, CD, and high-resolution digital, including the previous Analogue Productions release. To my ears, the new UHQR has a slight edge over the others. That edge arises from the clarity and definition of all the instruments, how Coltrane's saxophone pops, and balance that's the best of all the versions I've heard.

Is this UHQR the final word on *A Love Supreme*, at least on vinyl? If history serves, the answer is an emphatic "No." A $1000 vinyl version of Coltrane's masterpiece can't be far off. But to my ears, this new UHQR entry has nosed into the lead. ■

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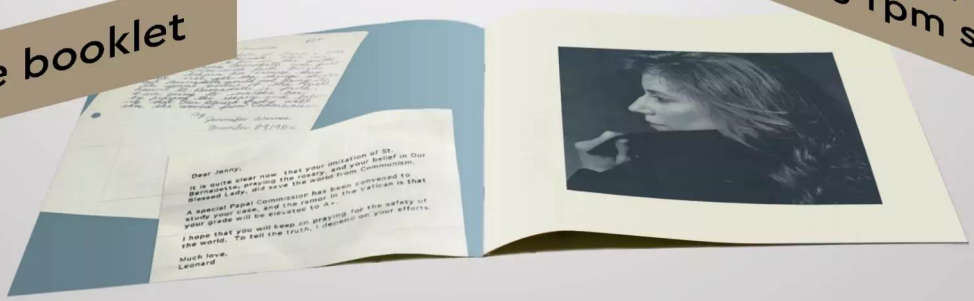

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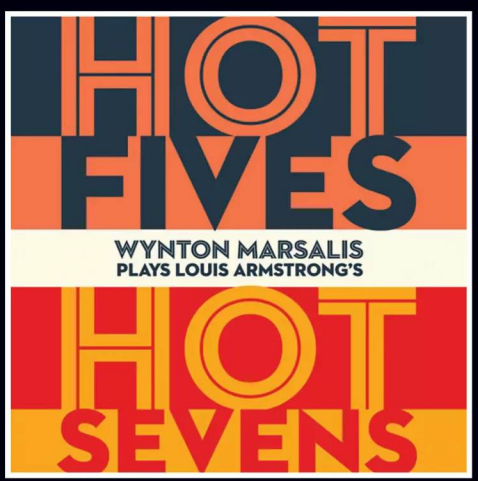
EDITOR'S PICK

RECORDING OF THE MONTH



WYNTON MARSALIS
Wynton Marsalis Plays Louis Armstrong's Hot Fives and Hot Sevens

Wynton Marsalis, trumpet; eight band members

Blue Engine Records (auditioned as 24/48 FLAC). 2023. Marsalis, exec. prod.; Saundra Palmer-Grassi, Todd Whitelock, engs.

PERFORMANCE ★★★★★
SONICS ★★★★½

Recorded in 2006 but not released until now, *Wynton Marsalis Plays Louis Armstrong's Hot Fives and Hot Sevens* was recorded live at the Rose Theater, the largest of three performance rooms at the Jazz at Lincoln Center facility. House label Blue Engine Records has now released this concert for streaming.

These performances are based on a series of recordings Armstrong made in Chicago for Okeh Records with the Hot Five—Louis's first recording ensemble—beginning in 1925. Those recordings changed not just music but also how jazz was consumed. While some of the musicians had played together for years—the band included Armstrong's wife, Lil Hardin Armstrong, on piano—the sole purpose of the group was to record this music; they never performed live under this name. This music itself was made to be recorded, distributed worldwide on 78rpm records, then played on the newly portable folded-horn Victrolas. It was a whole new way for jazz to be consumed.

From 1925 through 1928, Louis Armstrong recorded 55 sides credited to Louis Armstrong's Hot Five and Hot Seven. (On a few other sides, the Hot Five were credited as sidemen.) The original members, in addition to Louis and Lil, were Johnny Dodds on clarinet, Johnny St. Cyr on guitar and banjo, and Kid Ory on trombone. When Ory was away playing with King Oliver's band, John Thomas replaced him. For the May 1927 sessions, the group was joined by drummer Baby Dodds (Johnny Dodds's brother) and Pete Briggs on tuba, forming the Hot Seven. For the 1928 sessions, everyone but Louis was replaced.

Armstrong is often described as having codified two primary elements of jazz: blues and swing. These recordings are where and when it happened. Wynton—another great New Orleans trumpet player and a scholar of jazz history—has studied this music. In Ken Burns's definitive documentary *Jazz*, he comments in depth, often picking up his horn to demonstrate. "You listen to his sound and all the musicians imitated him," Marsalis comments. "He had that jump and bounce in his playing. ... The art of swing is the art of balance, of constant compromise. Swing is the rhythmic identity of the music."

This program contains 14 Hot Five and Hot Seven compositions. Wynton uses nine musicians and doesn't try to copy the original sound. As the liner notes say, "Rather than faithfully copying Armstrong's classic recordings note for note or using the same arrangements, Marsalis wisely chose to do *like* Armstrong did and not exactly *what* he did."

Wynton had the advantage of working with musicians he has played alongside for years: Wycliffe Gordon on trombone, Victor Goines on clarinet, Walter Blanding on saxophones, and a young (in 2006) Jonathan Batiste on piano. The nine musicians credited rotate depending on the arrangements. The performances feel energetic and significant. It must have been especially rewarding to hear this music live. You can hear the level of talent, hear and sense the musicians' enthusiasm.

Five of these songs have "Blues" in their titles, including "Savoy Blues," and of course "Basin Street Blues." Armstrong brought improvised instrumental soloing to the fore with his trumpet and cornet; until these sides were made, jazz was dominated by simultaneous group improvisation. Armstrong also seems to have invented "scat" singing, which he was known for for the rest of his lengthy career, on the song "Heebie Jeebies," included here. Another important facet of Armstrong's personality that permeated his music was his outsized sense of humor. Marsalis and his band pick up on it, too, underlined by Wycliffe Gordon's sassy scat delivery.

Marsalis and his band play and sing the heck out of all the differing moods contained in this music. Yes, there is a bounce to it all, and it all swings like hell, even slow, sad numbers like "St. James Infirmary Blues." Some of the songs are longer than the original Armstrong recordings; the album-concluding "Fireworks" runs 5:46 compared to the original timing of 3:07. The difference is mainly extra solos; the tempi are usually very close. Some of the songs on the new Marsalis versions include drums. Only Armstrong's Hot Seven session, with Baby Dodds, included drums.

Wynton Marsalis Plays Louis Armstrong's Hot Fives and Hot Sevens takes what was old and re-creates it anew. Is this classical music? Not in the sense of a Baroque string quartet, but in another sense, yes: This music includes several of the foundational building blocks of jazz. Marsalis and JALC have inhabited and presented a huge variety of music over the years, but this album is at the core of their mission: true, like ice, like fire.—**Sasha Matson**

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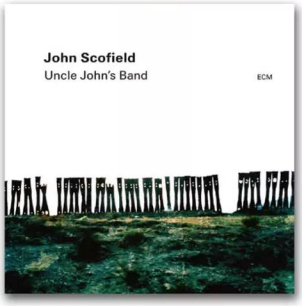


JOHN SCOFIELD
Uncle John's Band

Scofield, guitar; Vicente Archer, bass; Bill Stewart, drums

ECM 2796/97 (reviewed in 16/44.1 WAV; also available as 2 LPs). 2023. ECM. Tyler McDiarmid, eng.

PERFORMANCE ★★★★★

SONICS ★★★★½

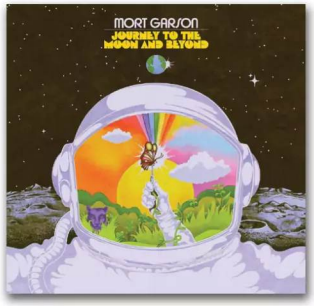
John Scofield is, by broad consensus, one of the three or four most important guitarists in jazz. Unlike so many of today's jazz musicians, he has the humility to play songs written by others.

In the liner notes to this double album, he says that he was 13 when the Byrds's version of "Mr. Tambourine Man" was a hit. It has been in his musical subconscious ever since. So have Neil Young's "Old Man" and the Grateful Dead's "Uncle John's Band." It is revelatory to hear him render "Mr. Tambourine Man" in his 21st century jazz-guitar language. He gives it his own hovering, atmospheric introduction. When, almost two minutes in, his inventions coalesce into Bob Dylan's famous melody, it is an exhilarating release. As with many of the familiar pieces here, Scofield's new extemporaneous details gradually take over and become their own form.

Scofield says he was about 11 when he saw the film *West Side Story* and was captivated by "Somewhere." Remarkably, in this dead-slow, heartfelt, rapt version, Scofield's improvisation is as beautiful as Leonard Bernstein's song. Bassist Vicente Archer, the newest member of Scofield's trio, is the beating heart of "Somewhere." Whenever he solos, Archer never calls attention to himself but instead reveals new dimensions of the story. Long-time Scofield associate Bill Stewart is one of the most intuitively supportive drummers in jazz.

Half the 14 tunes are Scofield originals. They variously demonstrate that, for all their rarefied musicianship, these guys swing their butts off—sometimes in a casual funk gait ("Mask," "Mo Green"), sometimes in a powerful forward drive ("How Deep," "TV Band").

Then there is "Stairway to the Stars." Scofield lingers over it, as if in a dream. He says, "I've always somehow known it." Haven't we all.—**Thomas Conrad**



JOURNEY TO THE MOON AND BEYOND
Mort Garson

Sacred Bones Records SBR3042 (LP). 2023. Josh Bonati, eng.

PERFORMANCE ★★★★★

SONICS ★★★★★

Is it possible to convey in music the emotions those watching felt on July 20, 1969, during the first moon landing? Undaunted by the task, keyboardist Mort Garson composed "Moon Journey" under commission for the CBS broadcast of that landmark event. It also happened to be his birthday.

Opening with an electronic swish and the sound of a rocket igniting, Garson uses heraldic tones, arpeggios, and flashes of noise before stopping and transforming into space jazz, a perky puppet-show dance, and a faster clattering section that sounds like the death rattle of a drum machine. The finale has a triumphal sweep appropriate to man's first step off Earth. One of the earliest converts to Moog synths, Garson arranged Glenn Campbell's "By the Time I Get to Phoenix" and composed his own takes on *The Wizard of Oz* (*The Wizard of Iz*) and the musical *Hair* (*Electronic Hair Pieces*). He wrote "Our Day Will Come," which has been covered by James Brown and Amy Winehouse among others.

Garson died in 2008. He's having a renaissance thanks to Brooklyn's Sacred Bones label, which has issued several of Garson's works, including *Mother Earth's Plantasia, Warm Earth Music for Plants and the People Who Love Them*.

This wide-ranging collection of works written mostly for TV and film, released on a red-vinyl 160gm LP with a die-cut sleeve, is consistent despite the plethora of sources. His "Main Theme" to the blaxploitation film *Black Eye* is convincing '70s funk that owes its bounce to *Super Fly*. "Captain DJ Disco UFO (Pt. III)" is electronic proto-dance music. The evocatively titled "Western Dragon (Pt 1)" mixes Asian influences with a Native American flute ambiance. The mark of a great film music composer, someone who composes in partnership with an image, is that the music they make is listenable, or in Garson's case even wonderful, apart from the visual.—**Robert Baird**

JAMES BRANDON LEWIS/ RED LILY QUINTET
For Mahalia, With Love

Lewis, tenor saxophone; four others

TAO Forms TAO 13 (reviewed on CD, available as LP). 2023. Lewis, prod.; Paul Wickliffe, eng.

PERFORMANCE ★★★★½

SONICS ★★★★★

In 2021, *Jesup Wagon*, by James Brandon Lewis's Red Lily Quintet, was voted Album of the Year in both the *DownBeat* and *JazzTimes* critics' polls. Even jazz insiders who knew about Lewis did not expect this debut album by an ensemble containing no household names to be so honored.

The Red Lily Quintet has now released its second project. Like *Jesup Wagon* (which was a homage to George Washington Carver), it is a concept album. There are nine songs associated with beloved gospel singer Mahalia Jackson. The first editions of the CD and LP pressings will also include a suite, *These Are Soulful Days*, commissioned by the Jazztopad Festival in Wroclaw, Poland, performed by Lewis and the Lutosławski String Quartet.

Lewis's achievement on *For Mahalia, With Love* is to remain faithful to the deep spiritual resonance of songs like "Were You There" and "Wade in the Water" yet to use them as inspiration for bold creative expansion. When Lewis's clarion tenor saxophone first announces "Swing Low," it is moving because this old Negro spiritual is embedded in American historical memory. It is exhilarating when the band celebrates this sacred text by setting it free. Lewis and cornetist Kirk Knuffke are fearless, powerful, passionate improvisers. "Go Down, Moses" is a foundation of hope and aspiration from which Lewis, Knuffke, and bassist William Parker rise up and testify, individually and collectively, for 10 minutes. This band's sublime cacophony is grounded in its calling.

The second CD reveals another, more overtly scholarly dimension of Lewis's art. The two dimensions come together when, at the end of the concert in Poland with strings, he plays a solo saxophone encore, a soaring version of the spiritual "Take Me to the Water."—**Thomas Conrad**

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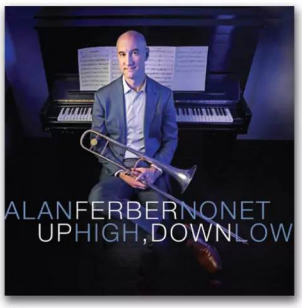


ALAN FERBER NONET
Up High, Down Low

Ferber, trombone, arrangements; others

Sunnyside 1694 (reviewed from CD). 2023. Ferber, prod.; Chris Benham, eng.

PERFORMANCE ★★★★★

SONICS ★★★★★

For those of us who love nonets, Alan Ferber is *The Man*. He keeps making nonet records (five to date), with flair.

In the right hands, a nonet offers the best of both worlds: the impact of a big band and the agility of a small group. As an arranger, Ferber sounds born to the format. With nine instruments, he creates deep densities of detail and assembles diverse elements into elegant designs.

The opening title track of his new album sets the rules of engagement. Fine threads of counterpoint interweave. Riffs within riffs fly by. Seemingly autonomous fragments of melody coexist in musical space. Then the full ensemble combines those fragments into one aggregated melody and shouts it, triumphantly. The risk of a style as sophisticated as Ferber's is that it can feel overwrought. But this music never sounds fussy. It hits too hard.

Ferber wrote five of the nine tunes. He also made some interesting external song choices. "Cherokee Louise" is a dark, disturbing Joni Mitchell piece about sexual abuse, with an unsettling melody. "The More I See You" is a minor standard ballad by Harry Warren and Mack Gordon. Ferber turns it into a headlong anthem, to unleash soloists.

Speaking of soloists, Ferber the bandleader has one of the world's best trombonists in his nonet: himself. Throughout, his eloquent, intrepid proclamations establish the extroverted personality of the album. The other players are not quite famous but deserve to be. Everyone makes the most of their solo space. Charles Pillow (flute) and Scott Wendholt (trumpet) are wonderfully down-and-dirty on the minor blues "Brimstone Boogaloo." On "Violet Soul," Jon Gordon (alto sax) vividly portrays passion barely contained. Chris Cheek (baritone) and Nir Felder (guitar) spill their guts on "Ice Fall."—**Thomas Conrad**

DOLPHIN
Preg Foat & Gigi Masin

Strut Strut311LP (LP). 2023. Dave Granshaw, eng.

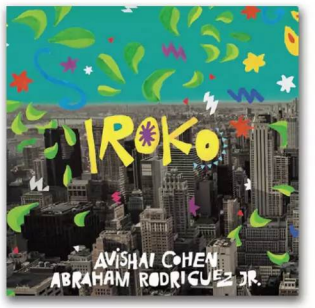
PERFORMANCE ★★★★½

SONICS ★★★★★

Born and raised on the Isle of Wight, pianist Greg Foat, whose playing loosely falls in the genre of jazz, is a dedicated musical explorer. In a variety of contexts including the duo Hampshire & Foat and the 8-piece Greg Foat Group, the pianist floats inside and between genres, resisting any fixed labels for his music.

Here, with the help of Italian composer/keyboard player Gigi Masin, he toggles between large-scale, almost symphonic pieces like the opening "Lee" before sitting down in front of the Fender Rhodes and tucking into the drum-backed groove of "London Nights," which feels uncannily like a Bob James outtake from the late '70s. Masin has been an experimentalist in electronic music since the '70s. He is the creator of *Wind*, a long-lost classic from 1986. Also appearing on certain tracks are drummer Moses Boyd, bassist Tom Herbert, and flautist/clarinetist Siobhan Cosgrove.With Foat on grand piano, vibraphone, and vintage synths and Masin on electric piano, sounds culled from a digital library and an "old" Pad2, *Dolphin* is a mashup of jazz and ambient music seasoned with library music and a touch of Krautrock. (The term "library" denotes music of all genres created for stock music libraries that license it out to TV, radio, and film companies.)

Foat is supremely sound conscious and dedicated to analog recording, which adds rounder tones to his timbres and textures. And creating textures is Foat's most pointed bag; he is even credited here with "bottle-blowing." On "Love Theme" (with its library-like title), the pair mix acoustic piano with synth textures as the piece rhythmically inhales and exhales, a motion repeated throughout *Dolphin*. In "Viento Calido," a push-pull ghostly vocal synth sound embodies the rhythm. Mixing acoustic instruments with electronics is all the rage today, but few do it with the kind of style and respect for old and new found on *Dolphin*.—**Robert Baird**



AVISHAI COHEN & ABRAHAM RODRIGUEZ JR.
Iroko

Cohen, bass, vocals; Rodriguez, congas, vocals; Virginia Alves, vocals

Naïve 8080, 8081 (CD, LP). 2023. Cohen, Javier Limón, prods.; Garret De Block, Ryan Phillips, engs.

PERFORMANCE ★★★★½

SONICS ★★★★½

After a 30-year musical acquaintance, Israeli bassist Avishai Cohen and Nuyorican congero Abraham Rodriguez Jr. have recorded a novel duet album with material ranging from Afro-Cuban chants to American pop and R&B oldies. Rodriguez's expertly played congas furnish even the unlikeliest tunes with vibrant Latin rhythms, while Cohen's robust bass is sonorous enough to buoy percussion and vocals with no other instruments present.

The album was Cohen's initiative, but the tracks reflect the eclectic repertoire of Rodriguez, who provides throaty lead vocals in Spanish, English, and African languages with vocal harmonies by Cohen and Spanish singer Virginia Alves. Santería chants "The Healer" and "Thunder Drum" were recorded nearly 50 years ago under different titles by the Grupo Folklorico y Experimental Nuevayorquino, an ensemble that included the late trumpeter-percussionist Jerry González and his bassist brother Andy; *Iroko* is dedicated to both.

The duo also cover such well-known Cuban classics as "Tintorera Ya Llego," by Arsenio Rodriguez; "Fania" (retitled "Fahina"), by Reinaldo Bolaños; *and* "A la Loma de Belen" by Ignacio Piñeiro. They pay tribute to Abraham Rodriguez's Puerto Rican roots with Rafael Cortijo's "A Bailar Mi Bomba" and nod to Cohen's Israeli heritage with the theme from the movie *Exodus*, whose lyrics have a chauvinistic ring today.

The percussionist's wide-ranging tastes are displayed on the remaining English-language songs—Frank Sinatra's "Fly Me to the Moon," Frankie Avalon's "Venus," and James Brown's "It's a Man's Man's Man's World" (the last two with added Spanish lyrics)—which Rodriguez sings huskily while the bass plays ringing vamps and the congas snap, crackle, and pop.—**Larry Birnbaum**

CLASSICAL

SPANISH IMPRESSIONS
Hermitage Piano Trio

Reference Recordings RR151 (reviewed as 24/176.4 FLAC download). 2023. Victor and Marina A. Ledin, prods.; Sean Royce Martin, Keith O. Johnson, engs.

PERFORMANCE ★★★★★
SONICS ★★★★★

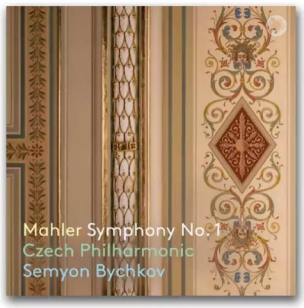
Here's a real treat: piano trios by four outstanding Spanish composers—Enrique Fernández Arbós, Joaquín Turina, Gaspar Cassadó, and Mariano Perelló. All except Cassadó, a famed cellist born in 1897 who studied with Pablo Casals in Paris, composed during the same golden period as Granados, Falla, and Albéniz—the composers whose orchestral music graces Fritz Reiner's famed Living Stereo recording, *Spain*. Expertly recorded at Skywalker Sound by the family team of Sean Martin and Keith O. Johnson, the hi-rez recording stands out for its excellent dynamics, natural colors, and big, realistically spaced images that fill a natural-sounding acoustic. It also impresses with its many pages of informative liner notes.

Unless you're a connoisseur, the four compositions may be a bit too alike to take in in one sitting, yet they are ideal for auditioning in smaller chunks. Composed in Berlin and premiered in Brussels, Arbós's *Trois Pièces originales dans le genre Espagnol* are delicious accountings of three Spanish dances: Bolero, Habanera, and Seguidillas Gitanas. The Hermitage Piano Trio sounds right at home with the color and verve of this music.

Paris-schooled Turina's Piano Trio No.2 in B minor blends Western European cosmopolitan sophistication with Spanish passion. In the middle movement, which alternates between intrigue, longing, and seduction, you can virtually hear castanets. The final lento is passionate and intimate with gorgeous delicate passages that lead to an all-out ending.

All-out is also the byword for Cassadó's intense Piano Trio in C Major, which requires serious musicianship. Violinist Perelló's gypsy-inspired *Tres Impresiones*, which begins with a tribute to Albéniz, his teacher, makes for a delightful conclusion.

—Jason Victor Serinus



MAHLER
Symphony No. 1

Czech Philharmonic/Semyon Bychkov

Pentatone Music PTC5187043 (CD). 2023. Holger Urbach, prod.; Stephan Reh, eng.

PERFORMANCE ★★★★½
SONICS ★★★★★

Bychkov's Mahler No.1, like his previous Mahler, is marked by moderation, yet he doesn't sacrifice energy or drama.

The opening string octave glides in ethereally, but the bass clarinet falls behind in the soft fanfare—why wasn't this corrected? The rising bassline unfolds patiently, and the cheerful exposition picks up slightly, though its final ritard overshoots its intended destination. The development is spacious, with an easy affirmation at the *maggiore*. There are a few passing "dirty" chords, and the strings' slurring legatos push ahead nervously. This movement could have used an extra session.

The *Ländler* has nice brightness and lift; buzzy articulations enliven its chromatic bass transition. The *Trio* sings with gracious simplicity and dignity; the basses incisively seize the recap, which builds to an exuberant finish. In the Funeral March, the solo bass's segmented phrasing is effective, but not all the subsequent entries follow through. The *Wayfarer* section starts a bit loudly—though Bychkov shapes it sensitively—and tempi remain equable.

In the cogent, well-proportioned *Finale*, the turbulent introduction answers ominous brass motifs with bristling string runs, eschewing the Punch-and-Judy antics of the Bernstein school. The momentum and drive carry through the first theme; the second, flowing and gracious, reaches an impassioned climax. The quiet foreshadowing of the big fanfare holds close to tempo. The extended coda steps proudly in time.

The reeds are round and warm—the *Finale*'s oboe solo is particularly poignant—and the tapered string sound has added warmth. First-rate sonics convey layered textures and give the brasses imposing depth, with horn and trumpet groups clear within the space. But soft horns lack a presence, and some of the distance effects aren't quite distant enough.**—Stephen Francis Vasta**

MAURICE RAVEL
L'Heure espagnole • Bolero

Les Siècles, François-Xavier Roth, cond.

Harmonia Mundi HMM 905361 (24/96 WAV). 2023. Jiri Heger, prod. & eng.; Alice Ragon, eng.

PERFORMANCE ★★★★★
SONICS ★★★★½

For their fifth expectation-shattering recording of Ravel's music, performed with the period instruments whose timbres Ravel expected to hear but that we for the most part are not used to, François-Xavier Roth turns to two of the composer's most distinct works: the ever-repetitious *Bolero*, whose popularity and substance he himself disparaged, and the one-act comic opera *L'Heure espagnole*, whose pedestrian subject matter belies its musical sophistication. These works may be dramatically different from the Violin Sonata reviewed in the previous issue, but all this music shares the dazzling colors and piquant harmonies that make Ravel's music so special.

Imagine a ballet in which perhaps a dozen virtuosos, dressed in different, brightly colored outfits. Each tries to outdo the others as they prance, leap, and pirouette across the stage. Imagine it as music and you'll have a sense of how unique this *Bolero* sounds. At first, Roth's woodwind soloists stick to the score; then, with each successive star turn, they blues it up more and more. As you delight in the distinctive sound of the orchestra's period woodwinds, gut strings, and seldom-heard tambour drums, castanets, and Erard style harps, you find yourself increasingly immersed in a mesmerizing technicolor spectacle. By the time the volume has reached a fevered pitch and the orchestra seems on the verge of losing control, the colors have grown so dazzling that the eyes open wide and the mouth drops agape.

Ravel's one-act, quasi-vaudevillian farce is such a preposterous celebration of marital infidelity and inept seduction that I kept breaking into laughter. What elevates it artistically is the striking contrast between the libretto's intentional banality and the music's utter sophistication. The singers are excellent and the pacing perfect. Don't miss this one.**—Jason Victor Serinus**

MELODY MOORE
Remembering Tebaldi

Arias by Boïto, Catalani, Cilea, Giordano, Mascagni, Puccini, Rossini, A. Scarlatti, and Verdi

Melody Moore, soprano; Transylvanian State Philharmonic Choir & Orchestra/Lawrence Foster
Pentatone Music PTC5187070 (CD). 2023. Job Maarse, prod.; Tilman Dasbach, eng.

PERFORMANCE ★★★★½
SONICS ★★★★½

Melody Moore is the featured *prima donna* in Pentatone's Italian-opera series. This aria recital allows us to sample her in less-familiar roles. Some tracks here are very fine, indeed.

Moore addresses "Io son l'umile ancella" and "Senza mamma" with forthright simplicity, balancing that with appropriate authority in the *La Wally* aria. Her unfussy "Sento nel core" reveals an expressive potential beyond the reach of beginners.

A sequence of arias underlines the soprano's shortcomings in ways the full operas don't. Moore's top comes across as oddly cautious: The climaxes in *Bohème* and *La Wally* lack the desired sweep, though the first A in "Senza mamma" has it. The B-flat in the *Manon Lescaut* remains stubbornly bottled up. Some of her attempts to "float" the top succeed, sort of; others, as in *La Wally*, are tight and thin. The *Chenier* aria becomes labored, with slightly wiry *acuti*. Elsewhere, Moore puffs up midrange notes and burdens other passages with diva mannerisms some opera mavens adore but which impede directness and smooth vocalism.

Evoking the shade of Tebaldi provides a useful organizing theme but was perhaps foolhardy given Moore's very different voice. Compare the start of the *Aïda*: Tebaldi is firm and purposeful, Moore less committed. Because of Tebaldi's *La Scala* years, we're stuck with brief ensemble passages from Rossini's *Mosè* and Verdi's *Te Deum*, which don't contribute much.

Conductor Foster's support is inconsistent. His "Pace, pace" is spacious and buoyant, and Violetta's "Addio" is shapely. But he lags behind Moore starting *Adriana* and lets the syncopations in the *Aïda* get in her way.—**Stephen Francis Vasta**

ROCK/POP

ABC
The Lexicon of Love

Neutron Records/Universal NTRS401 (LP). 1982/2023. Trevor Horn, prod.; Gary Langan, Miles Showell, engs.

PERFORMANCE ★★★★★
SONICS ★★★★★

The mix of early Motown, a pinch of Chic's guitar, dance synths, and lush orchestration made *The Lexicon of Love* a firecracker of an album in 1982. ABC was not simply another New Romantic band espousing conspicuous consumption on sun-kissed yachts. Their music revelled in pop, it was filled with puns, and yes it was fun, but it was also eloquent. Their sense of irony, perhaps epitomized by Martin Fry's gold lamé suit and a quiff copied from Billy Fury, appealed to both hip and High Street alike.

To celebrate its 40th anniversary a few months late, *Lexicon* has been given the Abbey Road Studio half-speed master treatment, with Trevor Horn's production, Anne Dudley's arrangements, and Gary Langan's engineering. Improving on the original's sound was ambitious: this record always sounded good. After the success of "Video Killed the Radio Star," Horn could afford to splash the cash on production, and he did. His investment included a new, cutting-edge bit of kit, the Fairlight CMI synth given to J.J. Jeczalik to play with, and one of the first Solid State Logic 4000E consoles, which was used to mix the sound.

Showell's remastering succeeds in further elevating the sonic experience. Certainly, Martin Fry's higher notes benefit, especially on numbers such as "Tears Are Not Enough." Orthopedic surgeons should be on standby for "4ever 2gether," because when he sings "two's a party, three's a crowd/I'm surprised what gets allowed," shivers run up the spine. Another beneficiary of the new production is Jeczalik's synth. On the vinyl originals and subsequent CDs, the lyrics and orchestration dominate; the synth was perhaps overshadowed. Here it is brought forward to share the limelight. *The Lexicon of Love* already had the polish, but like a pair of Oxford shoes worn for an important date, a mirror shine is always desirable, and here, it gleams.—**Phil Brett**

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ROCK/POP

IN THE THROES
Buddy & Julie Miller

New West 6552 (LP). 2023. Buddy Miller, prod.; Buddy Miller, Mike Poole, engs.

PERFORMANCE ★★★★★½
SONICS ★★★★½

Americana power couple Buddy and Julie Miller make an intriguing team. They've been together since the 1970s. The combination of Julie's songwriting, Buddy's guitarwork, and their two singing voices has helped them build an impressive body of work, together and solo. Armed with a batch of the best songs Julie has written in some time, they've fashioned their most heartfelt and tuneful collection so far.

If there's a bold headline here, it's "Don't Make Her Cry," a slow, sinuous co-write between Miller, Regina McCrary, and Bob Dylan. Julie's little-girl voice has acquired a rasp after years of health issues; that quality adds emotional weight to her lead vocal on the opener, "You're My Thrill."

Recorded by Buddy in their home studio, and mastered by Greg Calbi at Sterling Sound, this album is a classic example of a musician who's learned to be a first-class engineer. Buddy's guitarwork texturizes the instrumental backgrounds; he even adds a sitar-like tone to the raucous, slow gallop of "The Painkillers Ain't Workin'." While voices are the focus of the mix, the spread of instruments is natural and effective. Larry Campbell and Teresa Williams, Gurf Morlix, and Emmylou Harris add backing vocals on certain tracks.

The centerpiece, appropriately enough, is their duet on "I Love You," where their voices, always an intriguing combination, entwine on outstanding examples of Julie's wordcraft: "It's on too strong to unglue/It's on too tight to unscrew/It can't be broken into/I love you." Another majestic duet, "The Last Bridge You Will Cross," bends topical as a tribute to the late John Lewis, centering on the Edmund Pettus Bridge and wishing him peace: "Well done good and faithful servant/Rest now from your righteous cause/You are free now, come to me now/On the last bridge you will cross." The Millers are that rare husband-and-wife duo capable of great art together.—**Robert Baird**

JULIANA HATFIELD SINGS ELO

American Laundromat Records (auditioned as CD). 2023.

PERFORMANCE ★★★★½
SONICS ★★★★★

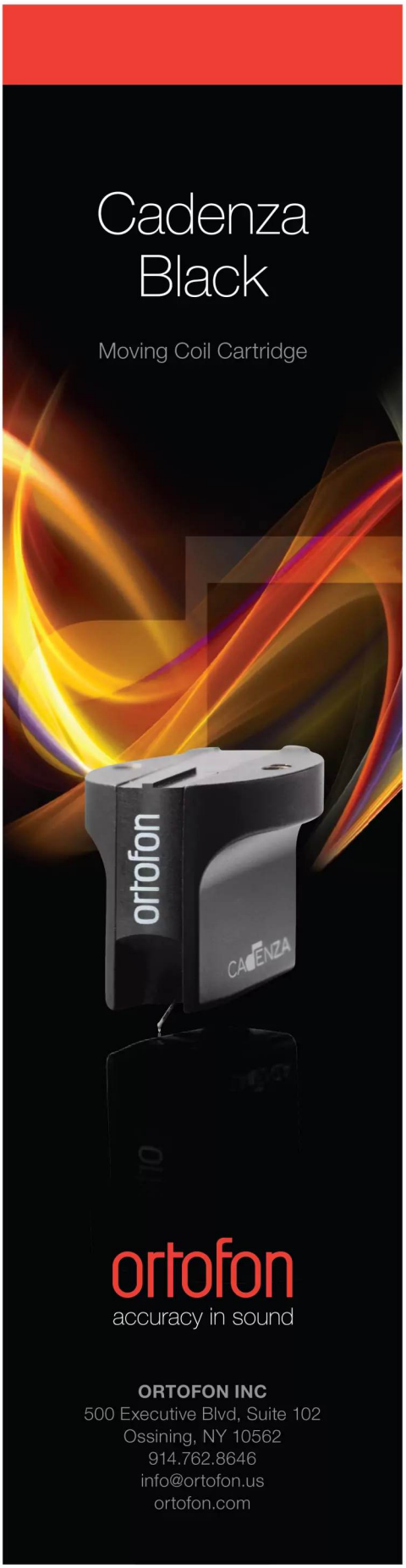
Juliana Hatfield has always found a way to stand out in what seems like a crowded field. As a member of bands like Blake Babies and Some Girls, she shaped a sound that was always fresh but also in step with what was popular. Five years ago, she switched gears and did something it seemed like maybe too many other artists were already doing: She made a covers album.

She chose Olivia Newton-John. Her take grabbed ears, turned heads, and reminded us to never count Hatfield out. A Police tribute followed; it too was widely celebrated; a review in Under the Radar said, "*Juliana Hatfield Sings The Police* distills all that's great about Hatfield ... and presents it in the context of an artist reinventing herself, and these songs, for all to see."

Now she arrives with her strongest tribute album yet; it may be one of her strongest records ever.

Juliana Hatfield Sings ELO is a brilliant look at the career of Jeff Lynne, one of rock's most highly regarded writers, producers, and performers and the singular creative force behind ELO. Hatfield picked his music to explore partly because they share an approach. Alone with Garage Band in her bedroom, she tinkered with the sound, arrangements, and harmonies with the same attention to detail Lynne brought into the studio throughout his career. The result is a 10-song collection that is bright, breezy, and lush but firm when firmness is required. The collection spans ELO's career including not just well-known hits like "Telephone Line" and "Don't Bring Me Down" but also "Ordinary Dream" from the much later album *Zoom*.

Deconstructing the work of an artist like Lynne and reassembling it requires rare confidence and daring. Once again she transforms the music. It loses none of its majesty and little of its depth. Indeed, Hatfield may have just moved the music of Jeff Lynne and ELO into heavy rotation for a new generation of listeners.—**Ray Chestowski**



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To win an EISA award, products must undergo a comprehensive, multistep judging process, and many still fall by the wayside. EISA's product evaluations begin in the first few months of the year and run through to early July, with EISA's webinar program putting brands and their latest technologies in front of the Association's expert editorial audience. Over 50 brand webinars were hosted by EISA this year and over 100 new—often very new—products were shipped between member countries. In-depth testing and judging extended over many months, fueling lengthy and highly informed discussions. Finally, after all the testing, EISA's democratic voting process establishes a consensus of excellence that ultimately determines the winning products.

To find out more about EISA, visit www.eisa.eu

EISA
STANDMOUNT LOUDSPEAKERS 2023-2024

MOFI SOURCEPOINT 8

Although MoFi Electronics is a relative newcomer to the loudspeaker market, the accomplished performance of its SourcePoint 8 speaks of great experience. The retro-infused styling of this standmount model belies the fact it's a thoroughly modern design, employing the latest coaxial driver technology from noted engineer Andrew Jones, carefully modelled to deliver a smoothly integrated, full-range performance. Paired with a capable amplifier, the SourcePoint 8 provides a confident, engaging listen suited to both small and medium-sized rooms, underpinned by weighty bass from its 200mm (8in) bass/mid driver and topped by a lucid treble. This is a technically innovative speaker – and stylish to boot.

EISA
FLOORSTANDING LOUDSPEAKERS 2023-2024

BOWERS & WILKINS 703 S3

The impressive bass, treble detail and cohesive soundstage attest to the engineering skill that's gone into developing the third generation of Bowers & Wilkins' 700 Series, much of it trickled down from the company's top-tier 800 D4 models. Nowhere is this more the case than with the 703 S3, a slender tower that gains a tweeter-on-top for the first time, allied to a pair of 165mm Aerofoil bass drivers and a 150mm Continuum cone midrange. This floorstander delivers an engaging and emotional listen and makes B&W's premium performance accessible to more music lovers. The new Mocha colourway, next to classic white or black options, is also stunning.

EISA
PREMIUM FLOORSTANDING LOUDSPEAKERS 2023-2024

PERLISTEN R7T

Although the junior model to Perlisten's flagship S7t, this floorstander inherits so much of its sibling's design and engineering DNA that its premium status is assured. The company's patented DPC (Directivity Pattern Control) array takes centre stage, its carefully optimised trio of mid and tweeter units flanked by bass/mid and bass drivers in a four-way design offering the option of both vented and sealed operation. In full flight, the R7t creates a largescale and evocative sound built on a foundation of deep and tightly controlled bass that blends seamlessly with lush midrange tones and fine treble detail. This loudspeaker is worthy of the highest praise.

EISA
HIGH-END LOUDSPEAKERS 2023-2024

WILSON AUDIO ALEXIA V

The Alexia V exemplifies Wilson Audio's approach to high-end loudspeaker design, from its customised drivers and bespoke cabinet materials to its fine-tuning potential and array of luxurious finish options. A three-way model, its lower enclosure – hewn from proprietary V-material and featuring 200mm and 255mm bass drivers – is topped by separate midrange and tweeter housings, both adjustable for precise time alignment. The Alexia V's performance can therefore be matched to any environment, and the listening experience is magnificent: vast in scale, exquisite in detail and completely free from the speakers themselves. To sum up in one word? Sublime.

EISA
WIRELESS BOOKSHELF LOUDSPEAKERS 2023-2024

KEF LSX II

For this second-generation upgrade of its EISA Award-winning LSX speakers, KEF has expanded functionality through additional USB-C and HDMI ARC inputs and a new wireless control platform delivered via a superb app. Use the latter to navigate streaming services, switch between sources and access comprehensive EQ settings, and then enjoy the LSX II's powerful and natural performance. The diminutive, rear-ported cabinet features KEF's bespoke Uni-Q array, its tweeter and bass/mid units separately driven by Class D amp modules. Available in several eye-catching colourways, the LSX II can replace a complete rack of hi-fi separates – and sound just as good!

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WIRELESS ON-WALL LOUDSPEAKERS 2023-2024

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EISA
WIRELESS FLOORSTANDING LOUDSPEAKERS 2023-2024

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EISA
HEADPHONES 2023-2024

MEZE AUDIO 109 PRO

For a company well-known for its luxurious and award-winning isodynamic headphones, the 109 PRO is something of a departure for Meze, being an open-back design with 50mm dynamic drivers. Yet its performance proves the manufacturer's adaptability: with its alluring combination of expansive, detailed soundstaging and tight, controlled bass, the 109 PRO is a superior headphone suited to all types of music. It triumphs in the looks department too, its acoustically smart design built around opulent black walnut housings and a slender, lightweight frame. And thanks to its elegant self-adjusting headband and velour earpads, listening comfort is guaranteed.

EISA
DAC
2023-2024

FERRUM AUDIO WANDLA

The WANDLA is another home run from Poland's Ferrum Audio. Nicknamed 'The Convertor', this innovative DAC/preamp goes the extra mile thanks to its combination of an ESS Sabre DAC chip, custom DSP and bespoke analogue electronics. Performance is superb, with music of any genre faithfully rendered and packed with detail, while Dynamic Digital Filtering, which incorporates filters from specialist software house Signalyst, provides options to finesse the listening experience. Want to improve the WANDLA's performance further? Just add the EISA Award-winning HYPSOS as an outboard power supply for even better sonics.

EISA
STREAMER
2023-2024

iFi AUDIO NEO STREAM

Functioning both as an outboard DAC and digital transport, iFi Audio's NEO Stream impresses with its versatility before beguiling with its sonic performance. Onboard conversion handles files to 768kHz PCM and DSD512, whether streamed from a home network, integrated service or connected hard drive, while digital outs range from optical to I2S. Such broad capabilities, plus app control and filter selection, make the NEO Stream irresistible to music lovers looking for an easy-to-use system add-on, as well as restless hi-fi tinkerers. A compact, futuristic design, which supports vertical or horizontal installation, adds to the appeal of a device that outstrips many costlier rivals.

EISA
DIGITAL PLAYER
2023-2024

VOLUMIO RIVO

One of a trio of new devices launched by Volumio and running the company's eponymous software, the slim and stylish Rivo is focused on delivering high-quality digital streams to your DAC or integrated amplifier, without complication. It's an impressive marriage of well-crafted hardware and the proven Volumio software, allowing you to stream your own music library, play files from USB storage, and browse its myriad streaming options. The remarkable flexibility of the software, including the possibility of adding further functionality (including DSP) via plugins, is as appealing as the Rivo's ability to get the best from your chosen DAC.

EISA
HIGH-END
CD PLAYER
2023-2024

HEGEL VIKING

This player from the Norwegian marque takes an unapologetically purist approach, focused on extracting every last drop of performance from your CD collection. To that end, Hegel has engineered a high-quality AKM-based DAC stage and fully balanced analogue output, each fed by separate power supplies, while its proprietary SoundEngine technology also works to suppress digital jitter. An aesthetic match for Hegel's latest pre/power amplifier designs, the Viking's premium-grade sound has to be heard: articulate, three-dimensional and faithful to the source, it makes long listening sessions an absolute pleasure. Excellent build quality and supreme ease-of-use only heighten this CD spinner's appeal.

EISA AWARD Best Product 2023-2024
HIGH-END CD PLAYER
Hegel Viking

EISA
TURNTABLE
2023-2024

THORENS TD 204

A bridge between Thorens' entry-level turntables and its high-end models, this well-priced deck is aimed at vinyl enthusiasts seeking an all-in-one solution, but with the potential to be upgraded. Fitted with an in-house 'J-shaped' tonearm, Audio-Technica MM cartridge and integrated phono stage – plus offering electronic speed control – the TD 204 is a genuine plug-and-play solution. Out of the box it rewards with a sound performance showcasing midrange insight, excellent speed stability and an open, inviting soundstage. Moreover, as its in-built phono preamp can be switched out of circuit, the TD 204 is perfectly set up for future cartridge and outboard phono preamp upgrades.

EISA
VINYL SYSTEM
2023-2024

PRO-JECT T2 W

The T2 W is an audacious attempt to marry analogue vinyl playback with digital convenience, and one that Pro-Ject manages to pull off with zest. At its core is a belt-drive turntable with 9in aluminium tonearm and Sumiko MM cartridge, plus electronic speed control, but elevating the T2 W is an integrated wireless module that lets owners stream their music to networked speakers and hi-fi systems. The 'Pro-Ject Control' app makes setup and operation easy, with options including lossless 48kHz/24-bit FLAC output and automatic streaming when you drop the needle. Spinning discs, while integrating the vinyl format into a 'modern' system, has never been easier.

EISA
INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER 2023-2024

NAD C 3050

From the outside the C 3050 pays homage to NAD's earliest designs with its faithfully executed vintage styling, but in all other respects this is thoroughly modern integrated amp with a do-it-all ethos. Power, rated at 2x100W, comes via Class D amplification, and connectivity includes HDMI eARC, a dedicated MM phono input and more. Plug in NAD's optional BluOS-D card and the functionality grows to include superior streaming options (including app control and multiroom compatibility), plus Dirac room calibration. And while the forward-thinking technology delivers impressive sound quality, you can feast your eyes on the C 3050's large VU meters. What's that about having your cake and eating it?

EISA
BEST VALUE STREAMING AMPLIFIER 2023-2024

SVS PRIME WIRELESS PRO SOUNDBASE

Smart features and potent amplification unite in SVS's Prime Wireless Pro SoundBase, as do a punchy, authoritative sound and ease of operation – just add your own speakers and you're ready to go. Keenly priced, but showcasing plenty of attention to detail, this compact all-in-one amp includes aptX HD support when streaming via Bluetooth, television hook-up over HDMI eARC, hi-res music playback through the DTS Play-Fi app (or one of its many other streaming options), and control options including a physical remote and Google/Siri/Alexa voice. In a competitive arena, this highly flexible amplifier stands out.

EISA
COMPACT STREAMING AMPLIFIER 2023-2024

BLUESOUND POWERNODE EDGE

Thanks to its impressively sleek, wall-mountable chassis, the POWERNODE EDGE can be installed practically anywhere – and the compact form factor is complemented by wide-ranging functionality. Controlled via Bluesound's intuitive BluOS app, this sleek 'just add speakers' amplifier can access streaming services, Internet radio and music files from a network or USB storage, while connections including HDMI eARC and two-way Bluetooth add even more to its versatility. Its sound, delivered by onboard amplification and with hi-res audio support, packs a punch. Use the POWERNODE EDGE as a discrete amp in a stand-alone set-up or combine with other BluOS devices to form a multiroom music system.

EISA
STREAMING RECEIVER
2023-2024

YAMAHA R-N2000A

Japanese craftmanship and hi-fi tradition combine with cutting-edge digital technology to ensure Yamaha's R-N2000A streaming receiver is both stunning and innovative. The vintage-inspired front panel sports traditional VU meters and tactile controls but these are augmented by a classy OLED display to help navigate its plentiful features. Yamaha's excellent MusicCast app delivers streaming options and multiroom functionality, but there are also inputs for a TV and turntable, plus FM radio. Under the hood, Yamaha's tried-and-tested amplifier technology delivers a musical, refined performance, with fine detail painted over a wide and deep soundstage. Yamaha's YPAO room correction is particularly welcome, allowing this amp to deliver the goods in every room.

EISA
HIGH-END INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER
2023-2024

MUSICAL FIDELITY NU-VISTA 800.2

This flagship integrated amp adopts the core form and function of its highly respected predecessor while showcasing performance and aesthetic improvements. Combining solid-state power amplification with nuvistor tube-based input and driver stages, Musical Fidelity's hybrid offers a best-of-both worlds sound: smooth and musical with cavernous soundstaging, but also gloriously aggressive and weighty when required. Driving ability also startles – this 2x330W-rated amp will handle any loudspeaker that crosses it path – while the reimagined front-panel display makes operation easy. The Nu-Vista 800.2 is a fantastic addition to Musical Fidelity's top-flight lineup, and a must-hear for any music-lover.

EISA AWARD Best Product 2023-2024
HIGH-END STREAMING AMPLIFIER
Hegel H600

EISA
HIGH-END STREAMING AMPLIFIER 2023-2024

HEGEL H600

Benefiting from an upgraded digital stage built around a new DAC chip and network board, Hegel's H600 is a worthy successor to the spectacular H590 streaming amplifier. The company's bespoke SoundEngine 2 error-cancelling technology is on hand to deliver a sound with abundant detail and control, aided by a comprehensively redesigned preamp stage that guarantees an organic, honest and compelling performance. All flavours of loudspeaker are welcome, thanks to the H600's hugely powerful '2x303W' output. Generous connectivity, in addition to its LAN port, includes digital inputs on USB-B (384kHz/32-bit; DSD256), three on optical and two via coaxial sockets. Aesthetically pleasing and easy to use, this flagship integrated is a tour de force.

EISA
PREMIUM WIRELESS HEADPHONES 2023-2024

T+A SOLITAIRE T

Leveraging audiophile technology into a mobile, wireless headphone is challenging, but T+A carries it off with the smart Solitaire T, a luxurious and lightweight set that offers excellent noise-cancelling and a performance that rivals accomplished wired designs. Key to its appeal is its versatility: a separate ESS DAC supports an HQ listening mode, the high-spec Bluetooth chipset is compatible with aptX HD, and there are USB-C and analogue connections too. Surrounding its 42mm dynamic drivers are closed-back earcups linked by an aluminium frame – gorgeous black and white colour options ensure the Solitaire T is as durable as it is stylish. You can consider these a triumph of technology and sound.

EISA
BEST VALUE HIGH-END HEADPHONES 2023-2024

YAMAHA YH-5000SE

The YH-5000SE is a spectacular return to the high-end headphone arena for one of the pioneers of planar-magnetic technology, and with a lineage that goes back to Yamaha's famed HP-1 of the 1970s. The modern design and build of these ultralight over-ear headphones is stunning, from the pressure-controlled open-back housings to the choice of two premium earpad materials, but it's the dynamic performance and the sense of detail and intimacy that will take your breath away. There are many challengers for the apex of headphone performance, but Yamaha's new flagship is without doubt a force to be reckoned with.

EISA AWARD Best Product 2023-2024
HIGH-END HEADPHONE SOLUTION
dCS Lina System

EISA
HIGH-END HEADPHONE SOLUTION 2023-2024

DCS LINA SYSTEM

A stunning addition to the high-end head-fi landscape, dCS's Lina comprises a network DAC, master clock and analogue headphone amplifier, all built to the same exacting standard and designed to be neatly stacked. Supporting streamed and wired digital sources up to 384kHz/DSD128, the Lina DAC is the beating heart of the system, and employs dCS's proven RingDAC technology to bring music to life with remarkable clarity and detail. The fully-balanced amplifier, meanwhile, has the energy and punch to work with even the most demanding of headphones. Interoperability between the three units is handled by 'Power Link' connectivity, and dCS's Mosaic Control app offers music selection, upsampling/filter choice, and much more.

EISA
MOBILE DAC
2023-2024

iFi AUDIO GO POD

Thanks to iFi Audio's GO pod, devotees of high-end, cabled in-ears finally get an alternative to mainstream 'true wireless stereo' designs. This novel system features two smart, touch-controlled adapters that fit snugly behind the ear and wire directly to IEMs of your choice – industry-standard 2-pin and MMCX connectors are supplied, with others available as optional extras. A capable DAC/headphone amplifier is built into each 'pod' to drive even the most demanding of in-ears, while broad support for Bluetooth codecs (including aptX Adaptive and LDAC) ensures wireless fidelity. Even the GO pod case, which recharges the adapters' seven-hour batteries, is smart – in all senses of the word!

EISA
LOUDSPEAKER
SERIES
2023-2024

KEF R SERIES

Technologies developed for KEF's higher-end loudspeakers, including the latest- generation Uni-Q driver with Metamaterial Absorption Technology (MAT), inform the design and performance of its stunning R Series. A seven-model range comprising floorstander, standmount, centre and Dolby Atmos-enabled surround options, it's suited to both home theatre and hi-fi enthusiasts alike. Whether used for music or movies, across the speakers there's a dynamic, detailed and thrillingly natural sound combining controlled, extended lows with open, wide-reaching highs. And the various colour options, including special editions for the R3 standmount and R7 tower, will have these gorgeous-looking cabinets fitting right in.

EISA
POWERED
STANDMOUNT
LOUDSPEAKERS
2023-2024

KLIPSCH THE SEVENS

This powered bookshelf/standmount model takes a design cue from the American brand's 'Heritage' speakers and combines it with a forward-thinking specification – the result is a package notable for its styling, feature set and performance. Tractrix horn-loaded tweeters and 165mm bass/mid units are pushed into action by custom DSP and beefy internal amplification. The Sevens' sound is bass-rich, large-scale and packed with detail, and can be fine-tuned to suit personal taste through Klipsch's intuitive Connect app. Comprehensive connectivity including HDMI ARC, USB-B, Bluetooth, analogue (inc. MM phono), plus hi-res music playback to 192kHz/24-bit, ensures this is a system that's ready for anything!

EISA Awards 2023-2024

Photography Expert Group

EISA CAMERA OF THE YEAR 2023-2024	**Nikon Z 8**	EISA APS-C CAMERA 2023-2024	**Fujifilm X-H2**
EISA ADVANCED FULL-FRAME CAMERA 2023-2024	**Sony Alpha 7R V**	EISA BEST BUY CAMERA 2023-2024	**Canon EOS R8**
EISA FULL-FRAME CAMERA 2023-2024	**Canon EOS R6 Mark II**	EISA VIDEO CAMERA 2023-2024	**Panasonic Lumix S5IIX**
EISA CONTENT CREATOR CAMERA 2023-2024	**Sony ZV-E1**		
EISA TELEPHOTO ZOOM LENS 2023-2024			**TAMRON 50-400mm F/4.5-6.3 Di III VC VXD**
EISA SUPER-TELEPHOTO ZOOM LENS 2023-2024			**SIGMA 60-600mm F4.5-6.3 DG DN OS | Sports**
EISA MACRO LENS 2023-2024 OM			**System M.Zuiko Digital ED 90mm F3.5 Macro IS Pro**
EISA LENS OF THE YEAR 2023-2024	**Sony FE 20-70mm F4 G**	EISA PORTRAIT LENS 2023-2024	**Nikon NIKKOR Z 85mm f/1.2 S**
EISA WIDEANGLE ZOOM LENS 2023-2024	**TAMRON 20-40mm F/2.8 Di III VXD**	EISA TELEPHOTO LENS 2023-2024	**Canon RF 135mm F1.8L IS USM**
EISA STANDARD PRIME LENS 2023-2024	**Sony FE 50mm F1.4 GM**	EISA SUPER-TELEPHOTO LENS 2023-2024	**Nikon NIKKOR Z 400mm f/4.5 VR S**

Combined Award with Mobile Expert Group

EISA MULTIMEDIA SMARTPHONE 2023-2024	**Sony Xperia 1 V**	EISA PORTABLE PROJECTOR 2023-2024	**XGIMI MoGo 2 Pro**

In-Car Electronics Expert Group

EISA IN-CAR HEAD UNIT 2023-2024	**Alpine HDS-990 Status**	EISA IN-CAR DSP AMPLIFIER 2023-2024	**Mosconi Gladen One 8|10 DSP**
EISA IN-CAR AMPLIFIER 2023-2024	**Ground Zero GZUA 6SQ**		
EISA IN-CAR OEM PREMIUM AUDIO SYSTEM 2023-2024			**Maserati GranTurismo with Sonus faber High Premium Audio System**
EISA MOTORCYCLE AUDIO COMPONENT 2023-2024			**Rockford Fosgate HD9813RG-STAGE3**
EISA IN-CAR SOUND PROCESSOR 2023-2024	**ESX QE812SP**	EISA IN-CAR SUBWOOFER 2023-2024	**Morel Ultimo PowerSlim PS12D**
EISA IN-CAR DSP SOFTWARE 2023-2024	**Audison bit Drive**	EISA IN-CAR INTEGRATION 2023-2024	**Helix Compose Platform**
EISA IN-CAR SPEAKER SYSTEM 2023-2024	**Ground Zero GZPC 165.3SQ-ACT**		

Combined Award with Photography Expert Group

EISA MULTIMEDIA SMARTPHONE 2023-2024	**Sony Xperia 1 V**

Combined Award with Home Theatre Audio Group

EISA LOUDSPEAKER SERIES 2023-2024	**KEF R Series**	EISA POWERED STANDMOUNT LOUDSPEAKERS 2023-2024	**Klipsch The Sevens**

Combined Award with Mobile Devices Expert Group

EISA PREMIUM WIRELESS HEADPHONES 2023-2024	**T+A Solitaire T**	EISA MOBILE DAC 2023-2024	**iFi Audio GO pod**

Home Theatre Audio Expert Group

EISA BEST BUY AV RECEIVER 2023-2024	**Onkyo TX-RZ50**	EISA PREMIUM SOUNDBAR 2023-2024	**Bang & Olufsen Beosound Theatre**
EISA AV RECEIVER 2023-2024	**Primare SPA25**	EISA SOUNDBAR SYSTEM 2023-2024	**Yamaha True X series**
EISA PREMIUM AV AMPLIFIER 2023-2024	**Denon AVC-A1H**	EISA HOME THEATRE POWER AMPLIFIER 2023-2024	**Musical Fidelity M6x 250.7**
EISA BEST BUY SOUNDBAR 2023-2024	**JBL Bar 300**	EISA HOME THEATRE SUBWOOFER 2023-2024	**Perlisten D212s**
EISA SOUNDBAR 2023-2024	**Loewe klang bar3 mr**		

Combined Award with Hi-Fi Expert Group

EISA LOUDSPEAKER SERIES 2023-2024	**KEF R Series**	EISA POWERED STANDMOUNT LOUDSPEAKERS 2023-2024	**Klipsch The Sevens**

Combined Award with Home Theatre Video & Display Expert Group

EISA BEST BUY MINI LED TV 2023-2024	**Hisense 65U7KQ**	EISA PREMIUM WIRELESS HEADPHONES 2023-2024	**T+A Solitaire T**
EISA BEST BUY OLED TV 2023-2024	**Philips 55OLED808**		

Home Theatre Video & Display Expert Group

EISA BEST BUY MINI LED TV 2023-2024	**Hisense 65U7KQ**	EISA HOME THEATRE MINI LED TV 2023-2024	**TCL 65C845**
EISA BEST BUY OLED TV 2023-2024	**Philips 55OLED808**	EISA GAMING TV 2023-2024	**TCL 55C745**
EISA BEST BUY PROJECTOR 2023-2024	**XGIMI HORIZON Ultra**	EISA FAMILY TV 2023-2024	**Philips 55PUS8808**
EISA HOME THEATRE PROJECTOR 2023-2024	**BenQ W4000i**	EISA PREMIUM OLED TV 2023-2024	**Samsung 77S95C**
EISA MINI LED TV 2023-2024	**Hisense 65U8KQ**	EISA GIANT TV 2023-2024	**TCL 98C735**

Combined Award with Hi-Fi Expert Group

EISA PREMIUM WIRELESS HEADPHONES 2023-2024	**T+A Solitaire T**

Combined Award with Home Theatre Audio Expert Group

EISA HOME THEATRE DISC PLAYER 2023-2024	**Magnetar UDP800**

Mobile Devices Expert Group

EISA BEST BUY SMARTPHONE 2023-2024	**HONOR 90**	EISA BEST BUY WIRELESS HEADPHONES 2023-2024	**Philips Fidelio L4**
EISA CONSUMER SMARTPHONE 2023-2024	**OPPO Reno10 Pro**	EISA IN-EAR HEADPHONES 2023-2024	**Philips Fidelio T2**
EISA SMARTWATCH 2023-2024	**HONOR Watch GS 3**	EISA MOBILE DAC 2023-2024	**iFi Audio GO pod**
EISA PREMIUM PORTABLE SPEAKER 2023-2024	**Bang & Olufsen Beosound A5**	EISA BEST BUY PORTABLE SPEAKER 2023-2024	**Pure Woodland**
EISA PREMIUM SMARTWATCH 2023-2024	**Huawei Watch Ultimate**		

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RE-TALES

BY JULIE MULLINS

THIS ISSUE: Two dealerships—Alma Audio and Audio Element—are adding second locations, one far away, the other closer to home.

Dealerships expanding

Often it seems we're living at a time of hi-fi–industry contraction—that expansion in retail, if it exists at all, is online, and the number of real-world dealerships is shrinking. But at least two California dealerships, San Diego's Alma Audio and Pasadena's Audio Element, are expanding in the actual, offline world.

Why expand? For the reasons you'd expect. The two dealerships want to expand their reach and capitalize better on the advantages that brick-and-mortar retail affords, especially when it comes to selling more expensive goods. They are aiming to reach more people in new locations with a more personal, experiential approach—much different than reading specifications, looking at pictures, and clicking the "buy" button online. Both dealerships are aiming to sell higher-end stuff at their new locations—the kind of sales that don't work as well online—to new customers in new places.

Owned by Alex Siufy, his wife Julianne Feres, and their partner Fabio Storelli, Alma Music & Audio has been in business for about eight years in the Kearny Mesa section of San Diego. Siufy and Feres recently moved to Sterling, Virginia, where Alex serves as general manager of Alma Audio East, which opened in June. Storelli stayed on to manage the San Diego store.

Alma is considering additional locations in other regions—a delicate business in an industry where brands grant resellers exclusive territories. "Whenever there was a conflict, we let go of the brands," Siufy told me. Current Alma brands include AudioQuest, Bergmann, Chario, Elac, Estelon, HiFi Rose, Luxman, Technics, Vinnie Rossi, and YG Acoustics. Siufy believes this lineup sets the store apart from other dealerships: "Our brands aren't in every corner. People are genuinely curious."

What prompted Alma to expand to the faraway opposite coast? "We were getting enough calls and interest," Siufy said. "It felt right to do something" on the other coast. Siufy thinks the DC area is relatively underserved while greater San Diego is oversaturated. Lately, California has seen heavy discounting, he told me: "People are buying whatever they can get cheaper." That's good for customers in the short term but destabilizing for the industry.

Siufy takes a social approach to business. "People who come in are regulars, people who are more than clients. They trust us in what we do, and they become friends." The new store is taking a similar approach.

At the same time, he aims to keep the place approachable for newcomers. The big, main room in the old store displays entry-level equipment. "They won't feel like, 'If I break this, I'll have to sell my house.' I try to be approachable."

Another California dealership is opening a second showroom, this one closer to home. Pasadena's Audio Element, which set up shop a decade ago, is expanding to Carlsbad in San Diego County, some 90 miles south of Pasadena. Audio Element is owned by husband-and-wife team Brian (president) and Jennifer[1] Berdan (director of finance and operations; both shown above right with son Griffin). Brian was, in hi-fi terms, to the manor born: His mother Sheila and late father Brooks opened Brooks Berdan Ltd. in Monrovia, just east of Pasadena, in the late 1980s. Brooks was a turntable-setup expert known for hot-rodding 'tables. Brian apprenticed under Brooks. Still owned by Sheila, Brooks Berdan Ltd. is still going strong.

Brian continues to serve some of Brooks Berdan's old clients, Jennifer told me; some have been customers for more than 20 years. Much of their business comes from referrals and word of mouth. "It's really about those relationships you grow with clients," Jennifer said. Audio Element sells Auralic, Boulder, Cardas, Chord, Clearaudio, DALI, Dan D'Agostino, dCS, Grand Prix Audio, Wilson Audio, and a few other brands. The business has grown every year since it opened a decade ago, Jennifer said.

Audio Element's Ian Forte, who with Brian will manage the new showroom, described the new branch location as "an opportunity to better service those clients we have and expand the net a bit wider." The new showroom's two listening rooms offer a "homelike" experience. One room is residential-style, for more serious listening; the other is more playful, with several setups in a warehouse converted into a lounge/game room. For now, the Carlsbad store is open by appointment only in order to provide "a more exploratory process" for customers, allowing them to spend time listening critically without interruptions, to best tailor their system to their needs and sonic preferences. The appointment-only arrangement also helps with staffing: "We don't want to stretch ourselves too thin," Forte said. "At some point, we do hope to have full-time staff down there."

Like Alma Music & Audio, Audio Element will keep its original location open. "The plan is to stick around in Pasadena," Forte said. "This is still our bread and butter." The Pasadena store focuses on entry-level gear and selling packages of components that work well together, priced from around $1000 up. The Carlsbad showroom will aim toward the higher end.

Jennifer said that people today buy differently than they used to. Customers can learn a lot online. "They can get a lot of info on the internet, but the expertise we have transcends what you can read online. We're not the cheapest around, but the value we add is our service. It's a fun field," she said. "It's never dull, right?" ■

1 Not to be confused with Brian's sister, Jen Berdan Green, from Brooks Berdan, Ltd.

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MANUFACTURERS' COMMENTS

THIS ISSUE: Representatives of JBL, Naim, Dynaudio, and Innuos respond to our reviews of their products.

JBL 4329P

On behalf of the Harman Luxury Audio team, we would like to thank Tom Fine and John Atkinson for their analysis and review of our JBL 4329P Studio Monitor powered loudspeaker system (October 2023). As Tom states at the beginning of his review, hi-fi is indeed at a crossroads. Younger generations of music lovers have grown up with a world in which streaming music is readily accessible on their mobile devices, played back on small, portable Bluetooth speakers and headphones. As those customers grow up, increase their income, and move out on their own, they seek a higher-quality audio system that doesn't sacrifice that convenience. As Tom states, he was able to play back music via Bluetooth within minutes of unboxing the 4329Ps.

At the same time, we see a continuing resurgence of traditional physical media, with sales of vinyl records and even compact discs growing alongside a decidedly retro design trend where vintage is cool yet again. This trend of "newstalgia," or modern retro, is what inspired us when developing the 4329P Studio Monitor. We were delighted that Tom explored all aspects of its connectivity including the prosumer XLR/TRS connections in his home studio, and his vinyl and CD collections.

Active loudspeakers have significant advantages over their passive siblings. The drivers and amplifiers can be perfectly optimized to work together, and DSP allows us to push the performance beyond what is possible with a traditional passive design. The 4329P showcases this with its wide dynamic capability, surprising low-end response, and ability to remain cool and collected during a torture test, like the *1812 Overture* Tom experienced. Active speakers eliminate many of the complexities of traditional component audio, allowing listeners to get right to the music. This is how we can keep a foot on both paths of the crossroads!

Jim Garrett, Senior Director, Product Strategy and Planning
Harman Luxury Audio

Naim NAP 250

The NAP 250, in all its iterations over five decades, has been the staple diet of many Naim systems. We believe that this new version will enhance many of those legacy systems and of course unlock the performance of our new 200- and 300-series range. The addition of the balanced input connectivity allows the NAP 250 to easily integrate with other manufacturers' components, allowing a wider range of listeners to experience what we have to offer.

Naim Marketing

Dynaudio Focus 10

On behalf of everyone at Dynaudio, we thank John Atkinson and *Stereophile* for the follow-up review of our Focus 10 streaming active loudspeakers along with the thorough evaluation of their Dirac Live feature. We are very happy to see that *Stereophile* appreciates the experience we are aiming for with the product, which combines high performance, ease of use, and considerable flexibility to accommodate the widest variety of listening environments and preferences. We are not aware of any other loudspeaker that offers Dirac Live functionality and the same degree of flexibility, and we appreciate *Stereophile* taking the time to explain this and convey the benefits of the technology.

In the right hands, Dirac Live is a powerful tool to optimize the Focus 10's in-room response—but this also means it is not as "plug and play" as our built-in settings. The results will vary of course depending on the room, how carefully the microphone is placed in each measurement position, and how much work is put in to adjusting the target response after the software generates its response curves. Not everyone will necessarily see the same results in their room as JA did in his, but the results could also be much better. As demonstrated by JA's time using Dirac Live, it takes some knowledge and trial to get the most out of it, which is why we recommend working closely with your dealer.

We once again thank *Stereophile* for helping bring the Focus 10 to the attention of your reader base. We look forward to expanding on its capabilities with future firmware updates!

Otto Jorgensen
Dynaudio A/S

Innuos Statement

Thank you very much for the in-depth review of the Statement NG. It's particularly refreshing to see reviewers approaching the software part of the product with the same weight as they do for hardware. While the hi-fi industry we know and love is still very hardware-driven, software is gaining importance. InnuOS represents a huge effort by a team of seven Innuos engineers that sometimes feel their work is eclipsed. I believe the team will be proud of this review and motivated to keep improving the software with the feedback of our users, partners, and (why not?) press.

Nuno Vitorino, R&D Director
Innuos

Monitor Audio Platinum 300 3G

On behalf of the Monitor Audio group, I'd like to thank *Stereophile* and John Atkinson for taking the time to measure and thoroughly review the Platinum 300 3G's and share this positive experience with readers.

Sheldon Ginn
Kevro

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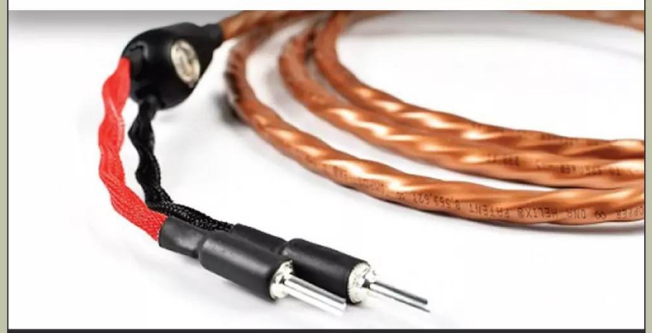

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MY BACK PAGES

BY SASHA MATSON

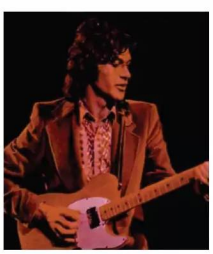
THIS ISSUE: When Robbie Robertson and The Band played the Berkeley Community Theater in early 1970, Sasha and friends were there to hear it, and they never forgot it.

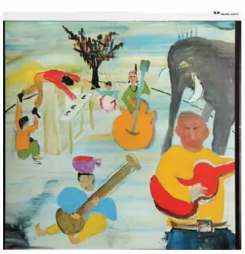
Make America Old Again

When I read the news that songwriter and guitarist Jaime Royal "Robbie" Robertson had passed, I forwarded a link to the obituary in the *New York Times* to my friends Doug and Jon. They were with me in the balcony of the Berkeley Community Theater on the evening of January 31, 1970, to hear a performance by The Band. We were juniors at Berkeley High School that year and lived and breathed that music every day. I recall sitting around with them outdoors, singing songs from The Band's first two albums.

My pal Jon, a singer-songwriter now living in Sweden, responded to the emailed link. "This is very heavy and emotional for me. Almost as heavy as John Lennon's death." It is heavy and emotional for both of us. Robbie Robertson left high claw marks on the tree—a tree with roots. Dylan commented, simply, "Robbie was a lifelong friend."

Robertson was born and grew up in the Toronto area, and after a lengthy dues-paying apprenticeship supervised by Canadian rockabilly/rocker Ronnie Hawkins, Robertson and the other boys who would become The Band lined up with Bob Dylan in the mid-1960s in New York, at the moment Bob felt the urge for electricity. They provided it as the Hawks, Dylan's backing band. It was of course career-altering. This white-hot period is well-documented in the 1967 feature film *Don't Look Back*. You can see and hear Robertson interacting with Bob during his 1965 tour of England. There's entertaining footage of Bob's Svengali-like manager, Albert Grossman, who would later play a determinative role in transforming the Hawks into The Band and the construction of the Bearsville Sound Studio complex in the Woodstock area, a couple of hours southeast of my upstate New York home.





If you tried to graph the progression of achievement for artists' lives, every one would be different. Some have ups and downs throughout, others peak in the middle, or late, and others, like Robertson's, are front-loaded. Robbie got started as a musician really early, performing professionally by age 14. When Hawkins first hired Robertson, he had to smuggle him into Canadian nightclubs because the drinking age was 18. When the music world first heard the music of The Band, in 1968, on *Music from Big Pink* (Capitol SKAO-2955), several of them had been playing together for a decade.

Great musicianship was a big part of The Band's initial success, but really it was all about the songs. Music history is full of examples of noted teacher/pupil relationships; Schoenberg/Berg/Webern is one frequently cited example. Robbie Robertson also had a great professor: Bob Dylan. Looking at footage from the documentaries, Robertson strikes me as an observer: controlled, always watching and thinking it through. Sitting at Bob's knee, Robbie had the talent to soak it all up then transmute it with his own creativity. Robertson learned from Dylan how to tell detailed, specific stories, not just "I love you in June" type stuff. As fellow Canadian Leonard Cohen put it: "You don't want to say, 'The tree,' you want to say, 'The Sycamore Tree."

For my money, what is now known as the *Basement Tapes* period is one of the most intense creative and unique musical outbursts ever, anywhere. I don't have proof, but I'm certain that while living in Woodstock in the mid-'60s, Dylan was listening to early American roots music from old 78s then teaching that to the boys in The Band. As Robertson said later, as recounted in Greil Marcus's brilliant book *The Old, Weird America*, Dylan "would pull these songs out of nowhere. We didn't know if he wrote them or if he remembered them. When he sang them, you couldn't tell." Those basements—there were a couple of different basements—and what came out of them is one reason I've remained attracted to the Catskills area of upstate New York.

It was also all about the sound: Three great, distinctive vocalists, Garth Hudson's prescient, unique keyboards, Levon Helm's earthy roots drumming, fiddle, mandolin, Robertson's deliberately nonpsychedelic guitar pulling it all together. Robbie employs precise rockabilly licks, closer in spirit to Carl Perkins than Jerry Garcia. Check the light, airy solo that closes out his beautiful song "King Harvest (Has Surely Come)," which concludes the B-side of their masterpiece second album, *The Band* (Capitol STAO-132), released in September 1969, now affectionately called *The Brown Album*. I still have my original copy, but you should listen to the outstanding 2019, 50th Anniversary stereo mix by Bob Clearmountain, pressed on two 45rpm LPs. The concert I and my homies heard in 1970 occurred just a few months after that album's release. They were touring in support of it.

Robertson had a lengthy, varied career after the formal demise of The Band in 1976—an event superbly celebrated and chronicled in Martin Scorsese's well-known film of their Thanksgiving Eve farewell concert at the Winterland auditorium in San Francisco, *The Last Waltz*. This live concert film initiated a career interaction between Robertson and Scorsese, through 14 film projects right up to the present day. He even had a handful of acting roles, eg, in Sean Penn's *The Crossing Guard* and a starring role in the 1980 film *Carny*, with Gary Busey and Jodie Foster. (He was also credited as writer on that film.) After a several-year post-Band pause, Robertson released several noted solo albums. He also produced projects for others. Robbie lived and worked in Los Angeles for many years, including in a musical capacity for Dreamworks Pictures and its subsidiary music label, Dreamworks Records.

But when I think of him and his music, I picture Overlook Mountain and the Village of Woodstock. ■

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